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イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン

HEAVY OBJECT

Manhattan In Stage
最も賢明な思考放棄
#予測不能の結末

電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations

鎌池和馬

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イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン

凧良 NAGRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。

でも、変化はあった。

——超大型兵器オブジェクト。

それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィ HEAVY OBJECT オブジェクト

Manhattan On Stage

最も賢明な思考放棄 #予測不能の結末



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[マンハッタン] Manhattan

「情報組織」本国最終防衛兵器。

「情報組織」の中枢であるニューヨーク・マンハッタン島を丸ごとオブジェクトとして運用するという規格外の兵器。

マティーニシリーズの暴走、およびAIネットワーク・キャピュレットへの脅威を感知し、起動。

ピラニエ=マティーニ=スモーク主導の爆弾雲を利用したマンハッタン攻撃に対応する形で電磁投擲動力炉砲を発射。その桁違いの火力を世界に知らしめた。

その全容についてはいまだ未解明。目下四大勢力では、マンハッタンの動向把握と情報収集が最優先課題となっている。



name / Molly-Melnic-Extradry

sex / female

place of birth / Detroit the great lakes

age / 14

height / 147cm

weight / 44kg

body size / 75-58-80(cm)

hair color / blond

eye color / blue

class / Major

belong / techno security.co.ltd.
OF the new york branch

post / defensive commander

postscript / project whiz.kid'melnic'series'
(plus alpha)



Prologue

Ksh.

...Kssshhh...

Kssssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

Kssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

An error occurred while processing transmission.

Datalink cannot be maintained using normal standards. Requesting authorization to open excess bandwidth based on Emergency Response Manual Section 3 Lines 2-7.

Waiting for input.

UNKNOWN

【マンハッタン000】
Manhattan000

全長…推定20000メートル以上

最高速度…不明

装甲…不明

用途…不明

分類…海戦専用第二世代

運用者…「情報同盟」軍

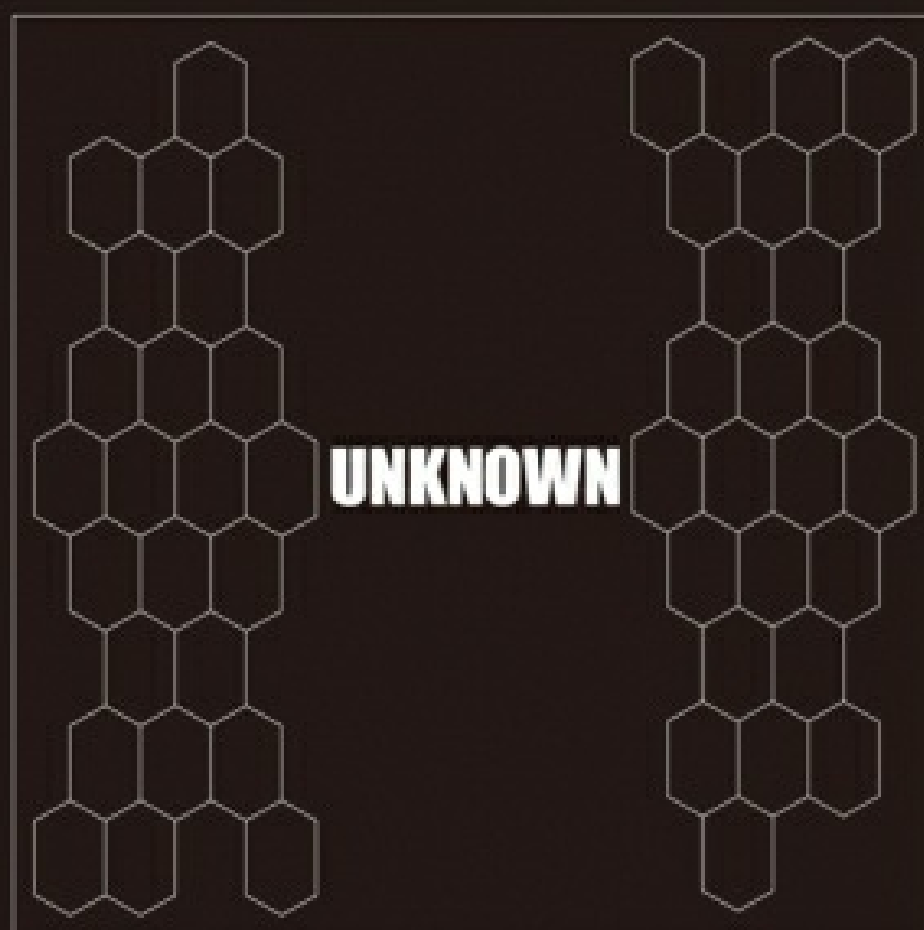
仕様…不明

主砲…電磁投擲動力炉砲(他にも可能性あり)

副砲…不明

コードネーム…未設定(「情報同盟」ではマンハッタン000)

メインカラーリング…グレー



Manhattan000

Detecting approval from three or more users with high-level access rights.

Resuming work.

Planning reroute.

As there is no play in the network, spontaneous data loss cannot be avoided. Preventing overall system hang-ups by restricting data transmission capacity in advance.

The reduction will have an average of 29% and a maximum of 47%.

Please be aware that redundant processing and unnecessary effects will be cut.

- Mekong District. Dorothea Martini Naked's tank development project and the subsequent project to misuse self-driving cars.
- The demilitarized line of the Greater Canyon. Observing the progress of the temporary factories that use the Faith Organization's hexavalent chromium in a project assisted by Arisa Martini Sweet, Rica Martini Medium, and Orsia Martini Dry.
- New Caribbean Island and the nearby ocean. Piranirie Martini Smoky's Manhattan attack plan using bomb clouds.

Link between data confirmed. No problems detected. Currently, the Manhattan 000 has been deployed to attack the Information Alliance maintenance fleet led by Piranirie. Firing of the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon has been confirmed. Scan complete. The viewpoint can be rewound as a real-time view.

A high-level threat referred to as the Ragnarok Script has been confirmed within the entire Martini Series which monitors the Capulet AI Network. Contact has been lost with Katarina Martini, the biochemical engineer who controls the entire genius girl project. Searching for details. There is a concern that this problem will not be contained to the Information Alliance and will spread to the Legitimacy Kingdom, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization as well.

Rebooting in safe mode.

Monitoring Point 1-9: Temporary recovery of datalink complete.

Target: Manhattan 000. Resuming monitoring.

Chapter 1: Bloody Pool >> Atlantic Artificial Island Proxy War

Part 1

Intense light, noise, and shockwaves.

In that moment, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage could not tell up from down, could not hold his memories together in a coherent fashion, and felt all his other senses melt together.

His vision blurred and he had trouble breathing like he had a thick translucent sheet over his face. He felt a scorching heat, but he could not get his thoughts working to the point of coming up with a course of action to eliminate the unpleasant sensation. Only the pounding of his heart sounded unpleasantly raw and real. That should have been the proof that he was alive, but it instead felt as unpleasant as putting back on a shirt after removing it.

Where was he?

What was he doing?

The blond boy focused his mind on remembering those two things. If he let go of that, it was all over. If his mind lost even more focus, he would never recover. He knew that without anyone telling him.

(Oh, right... I remember now.)

As usual, he had been on a shitty job with the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. He had been at New Caribbean Island, a tropical island near Central America where the weather completely ignored the fact that

it was October. It had all started when he set out on a philanthropic mission (but really meant to earn a diplomatic card) to rescue a Capitalist Corporations submarine that was stranded at the bottom of the ocean after having engine trouble. On that submarine, they had found an old woman wanting to defect from the Information Alliance. She had claimed to be Katarina Martini, a biochemical engineer.

By taking in the old woman who had led the Information Alliance's crucial genius girl project, they had triggered a serious military clash with the Information Alliance who did not want their technology leaking out. That had begun a fierce battle against the Nitrogen Mirage, a cutting-edge Second Generation that could bend its lasers as it pleased.

(...Kh...)

His mind was all mixed up. He felt a dull headache slowly traveling from right to left in his brain. His stomach roiled disconcertingly, like he had triggered some kind of trauma. This was an important issue. The Nitrogen Mirage was a powerful enemy. But that was not the crux of the problem. The true darkness lurked beyond that.

An Information Alliance landing team had attacked the Legitimacy Kingdom at the artificial New Caribbean Island. The Legitimacy Kingdom had struck back by directly infiltrating the Flagship 019 located at the center of the Information Alliance's maintenance fleet.

The fierce attacks that ignored the concept of clean wars had been caused by Piranirie Martini Smoky, one of the created genius girls who had gone berserk, and the giant administrative AI network that the Martini Series was meant to manage and correct.

Quenser's group had temporarily joined forces with Wraith Martini Vermouthspray, an Information Alliance officer, in order to defeat Piranirie and the Nitrogen Mirage.

But that alone had not solved the problem.

(Ugh. Ahhh...!?)

His mind roared at him to remember it.

His mind screamed at him to not remember it.

The positive and negative thoughts crashed into each other, tormenting Quenser Barbotage with the internal pressure. His soul thrashed about in search of any way out, even the smallest gap. And as a result, his mind was drawn toward it. He formed a link to the memory of the monster lurking beyond the thick veil.

He had heard a certain radio transmission while inside the half-destroyed Flagship 019.

It was coming.

The Manhattan was finally on the move.

(Ahhhhhhh!?)

[illegible]

He thought his skull would break from within and the pain felt like having countless rusty spikes driven into his head. He could not tell if this was physical pain or psychological pain. Regardless, it continued to shake him and his soul was forcibly dragged toward a certain answer.

Yes.

That was right. After that utterly baffling transmission...

A blinding light had...

“How long are you going to lie there!? Wake up already!!!!!!”

He heard a sharp shout and felt incredible pressure across his entire face.

It took him a few seconds to realize a bucket of seawater had been dumped on his face while he lay on his back.

“Ubh, what, cough, cough!! Uehh!? Cough!!”

Quenser choked and somehow managed to sit up, but then the toe of a thick military boot mercilessly kicked him in the jaw.

His vision shook and he rolled back onto the hard ground. It felt a lot like hot asphalt that had been sitting in the midsummer sun, but it was not.

“Ughh...ubweh...!?”

(What? Is this...the deck of...an aircraft carrier...?)

“Who gave you permission to speak and move? Have you forgotten that your lives are in our hands?”

He heard a low female voice from overhead.

He could not see her face well with the tropical sun behind her.

He also heard a young man’s voice.

“Captain, he appears to be the last one.”

“Hmph. That seems less than in the report.”

“Perhaps they went down with the Flagship 019 when it lost its balance? We could send divers to the sunken ship if need be.”

“That would be a waste of personnel expenses.”

Quenser tried to roll onto his stomach, but a military boot kicked him and he decided not to move. He moved only his eyes to observe his surroundings. ... They were there. There were maybe a few dozen soldiers wearing soaking-wet Legitimacy Kingdom uniform identical to his lying on the slanted flight deck. It was reminiscent of the corpses lined up for counting after a plane crash.

He saw dark clouds.

As if to predict Quenser and the others’ futures, thick clouds covered the blue sky and had started to blot out the sun. Although those may have been caused by the extra-large attack that had assaulted them.

And once the sun faded, he could see.

The person looking down at him was a tall and beautiful girl of about 18. Her skin was white...but it had a different luster from Quenser and his group’s. With that and the long black hair tied back, she was probably of Asian descent. She wore a bluish sailor uniform and a miniskirt. That clued Quenser in to the situation.

The time between the Manhattan’s attack and this assault force abducting Quenser’s group had been too short.

“...So you’re from the Flagship 019...no, from the maintenance fleet. Hah.

Were you promoted because your boss Piranirie kicked the bucket?"

The girl's subordinate gave him another kick.

She must not have felt any real hatred toward him. The Asian beauty looked down at him like he was a bug crawling along the roadside.

"We will decide what will be done with all of you. As I said, your lives are in our hands." She then glanced to the side. "But we have a more important issue to take care of. Hello, comrade! Lieutenant Colonel Wraith Martini Vermouthspray!! My fellow Martini!!"

Quenser tensed up at that.

Yes. Wraith's cooperation with the Legitimacy Kingdom had been a personal decision. Since the Martini Series which supported the Capulet AI Network was acting oddly, Wraith's decision may have been correct. But this and that were two very different things.

"Hello, Taratua."

"Hello, Wraith."

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray was a blonde girl of about 12. She wore a formal black hat over her long blonde hair and a pitch black uniform that was poorly suited for the tropical sun.

She had no allies in the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance.

A young man of unknown age stood beside her, but that alone was not much to rely on.

The Asian beauty named Taratua may have meant no real harm. The way the corners of her lips curled into a smile looked childish for her age.

Yes. Almost like the look of a child tearing off a captured insect's legs one by one.

"I was placed in the maintenance fleet as Piranirie's spare, but what kind of mission was a fellow Martini given that required working with enemy soldiers? I certainly haven't heard of anything like that, so was it a highly-classified special mission?"

“ ... ”

“Yes. Silence is the best answer here. Even if you try to lie about it and invent some fake mission, you never know when you’ll blow it.”

Their ranks were captain and lieutenant colonel, but Taratua did not hold back. If it could be proven that Wraith had been colluding with the Legitimacy Kingdom and had arrived here in violation of her actual mission, she would be no more than a traitor or deserter. Then no one could complain if she was shot in the back here and now.

“I’ll give you a chance.”

Taratua drew an impractically large revolver from her hip. It must have absorbed the dark color of the thick clouds overhead because the polished black weapon looked sinister. Wraith held out a hand to stop the young man who tried to move in front of her.

She winked her right eye and asked a question.

“You want to test my luck? That is impressively unscientific.”

“Ha ha! Oh, we’re not playing Russian roulette. Ignoring someone’s actual actions and only seeing if god loves them is more of a Faith Organization thing. You’re almost certainly guilty, but I know just how valuable the contents of your mind are. So, comrade, it isn’t your head you’ll be blowing away.”

Taratua spun the entire revolver around like a cheap pen and then held the grip out toward Wraith.

“The Second Generation Laser Beam 069, Piranirie, the recently sunk Flagship 019...and now an attack from that Manhattan 000. Our maintenance fleet is in tatters and our higher ups have probably been wiped out. We can’t let this continue. And if we’re going to recover, we need as many soldiers as we can get. And that includes you, my comrade and my fellow Martini.”

And.

She said it as casually as could be.

“Shoot that boy there. I’ll judge your true intentions based on that.”

.....

The atmosphere solidified.

Still on his back, Quenser checked on the situation by turning his head so stiffly the joint seemed rusted.

His eyes met Taratua's.

He could not read Wraith's emotions at all.

Before breathing her last, Piranirie Martini Smoky had said there was something breaking and driving the entire Martini Series mad. And it was controlled by someone outside the Information Alliance rather than Katarina, the old woman in charge of the genius girl project.

Was this also a product of that artificial madness?

Or was this normal for the Asian beauty known as Taratua?

"As I said, this isn't Russian roulette, so none of the bullets have been removed."

He understood.

What would Wraith Martini Vermouthspray do in this situation? Wasn't there anything else she could do? Quenser understood. If she obeyed, one would die. If she did not, they would all die. It was simple arithmetic. Even if the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been temporarily working together because their interests aligned, they were still enemies.

There was no reason for her *not* to do it.

Once you had $1 + 1 = 2$, no amount of searching would turn up another answer.

"We went to an effort to rescue these lives, so we will have these idiots work for us to make up for it. And they will keep working until they wear out and die."

But.

Could it be...?

"But things are different for this one: Quenser Barbotage. This irregular actor ignores the rules of cost-effectiveness by running around destroying Objects.

We will kill him here. It functions as camouflage and gives us a prize for the higher ups.”

“Wait!!”

That was when a soldier lying a short distance away raised his voice and was kicked in the jaw by one of the sailors walking between the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers who were lined up like corpses. A dark red liquid splattered from his split lip, but he kept shouting with the eyes of a chained dog.

“He isn’t a soldier! He’s a battlefield student!! If you know who he is, you must know that. Be careful how you handle him or it’s you who’ll be in trouble later!!”

It was Heivia Winchell.

But it was no use. All he could do was yell from the aircraft carrier deck.

Taratua paid him no heed.

“You are more like disposable parts than prisoners of war. The fact that any of you survived will be erased from any and all reports, so what does it matter how one or two of you is treated now?”

She sounded somewhat exasperated, but there were several endlessly ominous phrases mixed in.

And it was time to decide.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray grabbed the proffered magnum’s grip with a troubled look.

Taratua reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a device much like the collapsible opera glasses sold at concert halls. She casually unfolded it and winked.

“Say cheese. The time it takes to decide, your breathing, your perspiration, your eye movements, the trembling of your fingertips. I’m measuring them all like a true Information Alliance soldier, so don’t do anything suspicious.”

“ ... ”

The Asian beauty gestured with her chin and her subordinate soldiers

grabbed Quenser's arms and lifted him up. They were near the railingless edge of the slanted flight deck, so there was no escape.



A small girl stood directly in front of him.

The unsuitably large handgun's muzzle was pointed toward the boy's face.

(...Think.)

Sweat poured from his body.

He even had trouble blinking for the first time in his life.

Death.

True death was approaching.

(What is the Manhattan doing? If Taratua's group is just the survivors of the maintenance fleet, are they really working as a solid group? Has anything been done to that handgun? What does Wraith think? Is there something I could use as a bomb or another weapon? What's security like? This flight deck is unstable and tilted. The others are lying on the deck. ...What happened to the Princess's Baby Magnum? There has to be something! There has to be at least one thing I can use!!!!)

"I'm sorry, Quenser. It looks like you're still working your mind and foolishly haven't given up hope."

A voice seemed to slice right through the boy's thoughts.

Wraith's blue eye stared quietly at him through the sight.

"But this time, there really is...*nothing*."

The dry gunshot...

...sounded far too light.

Part 2

“The world’s...gest Obje... New Yo...Manhattan...tself was...mation Alliance’s Object!?”

“An offici...statement was...with a video. The Manhat...intends...join this war!!”

“Not good...ood!! Everyone, brace for impact! The enemy...an electromagnetically...ched reactor cannon. It’s a demonic weapon that...the heat usually contai...the reactor which uses lasers...pellet fuel!! Our New Caribb...blown away!?”

“Curse the Marti...ries. How insane...they!?”

It was pandemonium.

The busty silver-haired high-ranking officer named Frolaytia Capistrano’s vision had been entirely flipped upside down and she initially could not remember where she was.

Light flashed before her eyes like she had been slapped the instant she ran across someone. The core of her mind was unsteady and she spent a while in an unthinking daze.

Slowly, like thin ice being melted by a blow dryer, her mind managed to focus on the cruel reality.

“Uh, kh...?”

She first realized she was collapsed face down.

She had been in the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s officer’s barracks using her laptop to receive a report from a subordinate in their distant home country. But the scene around her had entirely changed. The ceiling was too low. No, the entire barracks building had been crushed down. The space was too cramped and the other things in the room were so close she could barely

see. She did not have time to check on her Island Nation collection. Her military-issued items and personal possessions were scattered around her. Among those, she grabbed a laptop with a broken LCD screen and a keyring of hardware keys. Then she crawled through the cramped space.

Luckily, she was not trapped by an ankle caught in the rubble or anything else like that.

Did she have to crawl a few meters or a few dozen meters? Her sense of time and distance were far too vague as she bit her lip and made her way outside. She could see the outside light ahead of her, but the end never seemed to arrive. She had no guarantee this was the right way to go. The collapsed ceiling approached ever closer overhead the further she crawled, so she might find her hips trapped before she reached the exit.

That self-produced doubt gnawed at her mind as she dug at the ground with neatly clipped and filed nails to slowly but surely make her way forward.

(Finally...)

The light was approaching.

She had somehow managed to escape the pile of rubble under her own power.

(...Finally.)

And as soon as she did, a hellish scene spread out before her eyes.

As a reminder, Frolaytia Capistrano was on New Caribbean Island located in the Atlantic Ocean near Central America. It was a special island made by the lava of an artificial eruption caused by stimulating a submarine volcano with explosives. The island was a collection of small black rocks that looked like crunchy chocolate and it had originally been made as a bluefin tuna breeding base for her brother Bloodrics Capistrano. Frolaytia had stationed her Object maintenance battalion there and had been in the middle of a battle with an Information Alliance maintenance fleet and its Second Generation Object, the Nitrogen Mirage.

Those assumptions had been blown away.

First of all, the color was wrong.

The dark stone ground was glowing like an electrically-heated wire or a reactor. The cooled and solidified lava had been melted anew by an outside heat source. Like two scoops of ice cream dropped on the midsummer asphalt, the melted surface formed orange rivers that flowed toward the sea and then formed rising walls of billowing steam. Thanks to the immense light, heat, and steam, the bright sun overhead appeared to waver and dim. It may have been the same as the lights of a metropolis erasing the stars from the night sky.

“ ... ”

It took Frolaytia a while to accept her situation here.

(This was done by the Manhattan’s main cannon. And it fired from a few thousand kilometers away...)

But she had to face reality.

There were around 1000 people in the maintenance battalion and half of them had gone to the front line based on the military operation Frolaytia had planned. So how many of the approximately 500 logistical support and standby personnel remained in this hell containing several orange rivers? That was about two schools’ worth of people. She had no idea how many more were lost with each passing second. She did not have time to stop just because she found it hard to accept.

“Report...”

Frolaytia raised her voice so it would not be drowned out by the explosive steam rising from the coast.

“Someone give me a report!! We need to know the scope of the damage, we need a relatively undamaged area we can evacuate to, and we need a set of surviving equipment and facilities! Simply saving the lives in front of you will only waste valuable resources. Then we can’t even save the lives you think you’ve saved. We need to avoid redundancies and carry out a rescue operation with maximum efficiency!!”

There was no response.

Not even the very basics were functioning.

“Hi, Tia-chan...”

“...”

The busty silver-haired commander’s shoulders jumped when someone spoke gently from behind her.

She just about let out her face as a family member, but she just barely managed to suppress it before turning around. She greeted the young man as the commander of the maintenance battalion.

It was Bloodrics Capistrano.

He had worn a black tailcoat even on this tropical island, but he had removed that, leaving him with just a white shirt. Had he used the coat to treat a wounded soldier, or had he discarded it before it melted in the heat?

He held a drawn katana in one hand.

There was no scabbard. For some reason, the blade was wet with a red liquid. It was unclear what had happened on the way here, but that was a clear sign of just how chaotic the situation was.

The sweat on his brow may have gotten in his eye or he may have had some other reason, but Bloodrics kept one eye unnaturally shut as he forced a smile on his blatantly exhausted face.

“Shouting won’t do you any good. The previous war is over. This has gone beyond Piranirie Martini Smoky or the Nitrogen Mirage. The conditions have changed.”

“What are you talking about? That isn’t for me to decide! It’s true the damage is severe, but we can’t just quit fighting a war like flipping a switch!! No matter the devastation before our eyes, we can still gather the surviving personnel and equipment for a counterattack. I’ll admit it’s like whipping the dead, but if we give up and stop resisting, everyone under my command will simply sink into the lava!!”

Frolaytia was not illogically relying on pure willpower.

She had more to say.

“Calm down, think, and never give up on being human! Why did the Information Alliance suddenly pull out their greatest secret weapon like this? It was at the center of their home country, so they shouldn’t have had any reason to send it to the front line. I don’t know the details of the issues with the Martini Series who monitor the AI network which may not even have a core, but if they have the full authority of a world power, they had to have had a better way of doing this.”

“ ... ”

“We do not know how far the problems have spread within the Martini Series. If it’s limited to the ones in charge of protecting New York, it makes sense that only the Manhattan was sent out. But this is a fluid situation. If the other Martinis also begin acting oddly, the problems could spread uncontrollably throughout the Information Alliance!”

“Tia-chan, you are overwhelmingly correct here.”

Her brother slowly breathed out.

Bloodrics was supposedly a civilian, but he spoke to his sister like he was calmly explaining something while she threw a tantrum.

“But there is no one to answer your call.”

“!?”

“By a general estimate, 60-70% of those remaining on the island were lost. And losing 30% is normally considered a rout, is it not? You can no longer maintain ordinary military activity here. Tia-chan, your job here is to remove or destroy all classified information so the Information Alliance cannot steal it. And that includes yourself as the major in command of the entire battalion.”

“ ... ”

“You must not be captured. No matter what. Do you really think the Manhattan is finished with only that one shot? Whether it fires a second and third shot or they send a large landing unit to the devastated remnants of the battalion, you have a single job here, Tia-chan: ...Escape. It does not matter how pathetic or cowardly you feel. Tia-chan, you carry a responsibility here, so you must get yourself away from here. Even if you are the only one that escapes.”

She intellectually understood that.

If she was captured, the enemy could steal the biometric information like her center of gravity or iris scan that allowed access to the military datalink. Or they could get her to talk about future operations no one was supposed to know about or the names of spies who had infiltrated enemy countries. Then the damage would spread beyond *just this war*. To minimize the losses, she had to make sure it was limited to *just this war*.

The busty silver-haired commander slowly breathed out.

After throwing the laptop and hardware keys into the lava, she drew her military handgun from its holster.

“...I will withdraw only after saving as many lives as I can. As their commander, I will be rear guard.”

“Tia-chan.”

“Yes, yes!! I know it’s inefficient!!”

Frolaytia shouted back at him and pressed the military handgun’s muzzle against her own temple.

Brother and sister glared at each other and she gathered strength in her brow to keep her face as a girl from coming out.

“But there are still so many allies buried alive in this rubble and lava, unable to even groan! Not to mention the soldiers fighting the Information Alliance at the maintenance fleet out at sea!! They’re out there because I ordered them there! I can’t use insufficient data as an excuse. I can’t abandon them and run away. They would die pointless deaths if I did!!”

“...”

“Destroying all classified information was the bare minimum requirement, wasn’t it? That won’t be a problem. Officers aren’t issued guns to shoot the enemy. It’s to blow their own brains out if need be!!”

Still holding his drawn katana, Bloodrics shook his head with a sorrowful look on his face.

He must have understood his sister’s feelings all too well.

She did not let her status as a noble bind her. When necessary, she had risked her life and used her own strength to protect her soldiers. That was a joyous thing for Bloodrics. If his sister had something she wanted to protect, he wanted to fight alongside her as her brother. He truly did.

Finally, he took a deep breath of resignation.

And the brother spoke to his sister.

“I’m sorry, Tia-chan. But I can’t let you do that.”

Did Frolaytia even know what caused the quiet sound on her head?

“Bh...?”

The pommel of the katana held by the silver-haired young man had dug into the side of her head. Just like knocking someone out with a pistol grip. Before she could even move her finger to pull the trigger, the *girl’s* eyes grew unfocused and her body went limp.

Before she fully collapsed, Bloodrics wrapped an arm around her waist which, as her brother, he felt was too skinny. If he was not careful, the finger on the trigger could accidentally fire the bullet.

“Striking my own sister... I am truly a disgrace to the concept of chivalry.”

He sounded utterly disgusted, but he was extremely dry when it came to this. Those military reasons meant nothing to him since he was a civilian, albeit a noble one. His first and foremost objective was to protect his precious sister no matter what it took.

On his way here, he had heard many voices begging him to kill them.

Some had had lava dumped on their head and others were caught in the rubble. Bloodrics had turned the tip of his katana on those soldiers who had no hope left.

He would not forget their words of thanks.

How could he ever forget?

“...I’m sick of it all.”

Frolaytia had built up this world of hers bit by bit as she resisted the noble

society, so he could not allow her to see it tragically fall apart.

She could resent him if she liked.

She could hate his guts if she had to.

Bloodrics tossed aside his bloodstained katana and placed a finger to his ear. He was about to send out a transmission.

“It’s me.”

As soon as he focused on the small earpiece, the young man took on the face of a noble.

“Yes, I would like an emergency exit. Use that submarine. I would like to pick up as many Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers as possible, but there is no need to force it. We leave in 15 minutes. Give up on any we cannot pick up. Don’t worry. None of you need play the villain’s role. That I will do alone.”

Still supporting his unconscious family member’s weight, Bloodrics looked through the lava’s heat and steam to view the distant horizon.

According to Frolaytia, she had sent some of her soldiers out to sea.

It had been necessary. Even if it had required ignoring her personal feelings.

But if the maintenance battalion withdrew from New Caribbean Island, they would have nowhere to return to. Once isolated out at sea, no one would come to save them no matter how much they screamed.

Bloodrics Capistrano was doing that to them.

He was prepared to dirty his hands with the things that someone had to do.

“...Such a disaster. For us and them.”

Part 3

And no one came.

The Legitimacy Kingdom military was supposedly stationed at New Caribbean Island. The Princess's Baby Magnum was supposedly out in the wide ocean.

And yet.

No one.

"...I'll kill you..."

A voice burning with resentment echoed across the rusty flight deck.

It belonged to Heivia Winchell who could not even shed any tears.

He moved his trembling body as best he could to crawl to the edge of the flight deck, but there was already no sign of his friend's corpse.

Only a strange dark red liquid stained the water's surface as a large shadow slowly swam below.

"Ha ha. Don't do that, Wraith!"

Taratua held her stomach as she laughed.

There were tears in the corners of her eyes.

"You can feed his corpse to the sharks if you like. Peh heh heh. But we'll never hear the end of it if you feed them the metals and plastics along with it. Ah hah hah hah!!!"

With that, something really did snap inside Heivia's mind. He crossed a line.

"I'll kill you!! I'll murder you!! I don't care anymore if you're insane or broken or whatever the hell. I'll turn every last one of you to mincemeat in a hail of bullets!!!!!"

In the end, where was that threat directed?

No one knows.

Part 4

“Attention, 101st Zombie Platoon!!”

They were out in the open.

There were not even any chairs or tables.

Heivia and the other defeated survivors of the Legitimacy Kingdom were gathered on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier which was tilted too far to be of any use. Rain was pouring down from the thick storm clouds, but there was no roof or anything else to protect them. There were not even any railings, so if they got careless and slipped on the wet flight deck, they could roll right off into the ocean where the hungry sharks waited.

The only person with a smile on her face was Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks, but she stood below a large umbrella held by a male subordinate.

“That impressive attack from my piece of shit comrade on the Manhattan 000 has whipped up quite the storm. That gives us an opportunity for the dead to do some work.”

“...Are you unfamiliar with the concept of war treaties? This is no way to treat POWs.”

“What, do you want to be thrown inside a zoo cage like the amusing animal you are?”

She was blunt.

Whether it had been injected from an external source like with Piranirie or if she had always been like that, the thoroughly-broken Asian beauty did not bat an eye.

“You cowards boarded our maintenance fleet’s flagship and then shared the fate of the Flagship 019 after a variety of attacks finally sunk it. Thus, there were zero survivors. Your survival has been scrubbed from any and all records,

so worry not and go have some fun.”

“...”

Heivia gave her a murderous glare, so she winked.

“Do you understand your position now? The dead do not belong to any of the usual categories, so we can ignore all those pesky treaties and military regulations. Plus, any number of you can die without it counting in the official records. Ignore the people in their living rooms. You can fight as you like and die as you like! I’m honestly jealous! That’s the paradise dreamed of by any soldier!!”

In other words...

The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were being forced to wrap their arms around the pile of shit that the Information Alliance did not want to grab with their bare hands. Their target of attack could be a region of hopelessly fierce fighting, or a symbol of peace that was bound to earn international criticism. They did not want to imagine the other possibilities.

It was time for a true death march where they were lined up in a row and forced at gunpoint to walk through a minefield. Each step would be terrifying, but standing still would get them shot. Yes, the death march was more than just this one battle. They would never be released. Heivia and the others were disposable tools. This situation would continue endlessly until they were worn out and died.

“...What are you telling us to do?”

“It’s all about balance.” Taratua toyed with the end of her black hair that was damp despite the umbrella. “I’m sure you saw a lot on the Flagship 019. The Capulet AI Network that supports the Information Alliance, one of the four world powers, is correct but too pure. After all, after the New Yorker’s used various countermeasures to avoid security cameras and email spying, it was rendered unable to see New York itself. If the entire Martini Series in charge of maintenance returns a strange echo, it could create a similar flaw in Capulet. ... But that is not the problem.”

“?”

Taratua was supposedly a part of that Martini Series, but she did not seem worried about herself.

“As its name suggests, the Information Alliance rules everything with data. Nevertheless, we were not told anything about the risk to Capulet or about the Manhattan 000.”

“You’re pissed at being left out, so you want to take revenge by having us blow up New York?”

“Are you braindead? This is an opportunity,” whispered the black-haired beauty below the umbrella. “The Manhattan 000 is currently traveling south at around 388 knots. The distance from New York in the Information Alliance home country and the ocean near New Caribbean Island is about 3500 kilometers, so it should arrive within 4 or 5 hours. It’s still a mystery why they would send their king to the front line like this, but there is one thing we know for sure: we were blessed with a chance to gather raw data.”

388 knots was 700 kilometers per hour, so it was not much different from a passenger plane. What had happened to the city of Manhattan and the people in it?

The usual technical nerd was not here.

With nowhere to direct his question, Heivia just spat it out.

“700...? How?”

“At the very least, it must not be using an aircushion or static electricity floats. The colossal structure itself is parting the water. It’s probably using supercavitation or something to reduce the water’s resistance with small air bubbles, but the exact system is still unknown. This is all information we must find.”

That gigantic a presence was staring them down from the darkness. Wasn’t that enough to sound instinctual alarm bells within any living creature?

And yet this girl had called it an opportunity.

“...Are you the kind of person who goes out to see the hurricane and gets blown away into the sky?”

“I will shoot you next time. What matters here is who can monopolize the most raw data available at the scene. As I said, the Information Alliance rules everything with data. The Manhattan 000 started moving and can apparently move under its own power whenever it wants. After we gather what data we can on it, we are not foolish enough to send all of it back to our higher ups, which includes the core-less Capulet AI Network. ...I mean, it already fired on all of you to cover its tracks.”

“Don’t drag us into your internal conflict.”

“Don’t be silly. Then I would have to take responsibility here.”

Even the simplest rules did not apply.

This was completely different from not having your words get through to someone. It was like emphatically speaking and even gesturing for emphasis only to see all that effort outright rejected. There was simply no opening in this girl. She was as inhuman as a giant praying mantis wearing human skin.

Was she an alien? Was she from the Shit Planet?

“They went to a lot of effort to hide this for so long. There must be some great secret to the Manhattan 000. And that would be very, very valuable information.”

Taratua giggled after glancing at the notebook-sized tablet she took from the subordinate holding the umbrella.

Was it showing a video site or online news? Or maybe the myriad posts on message boards and social media?

There was a lot of information related to Manhattan, but it was meaningless if none of it was accurate. When faced with a situation like this, it was the lowest of the low who could only think about shouting strange apocalyptic theories or fabricating a witness account to gather views for their videos.

“After taking this much blame, I’m not going to obediently stand aside and stay a lowly Captain. I will provide myself with a path to special promotion. I’m sure all four world powers, both our enemies and the Information Alliance itself, are rushing to gather information. That’s perfect. Those onlookers will trip each other up and fail to gather anything of note. Meanwhile, we will move

a step or two ahead. I will hold the valuable information on the Manhattan 000 and I will decide how to use it. Perhaps I will use AI and big data to join the upper class and enjoy a high society life of wealth. Or maybe I will threaten those people and use them as a stepping stone to an even more comfortable and leisurely life.”

“So it’s all about money? You sound just like the goddamn Capitalist Corporations.”

“Are you musty old nobles too stupid to tell the difference? The order is reversed. An information illiterate fool and their money are soon parted. When the poor hit the jackpot at the lottery, the story always has a tragic end. The truly powerful are those who first gather information. Whether or not they reveal their educational history, their occupation, the size of their bank account, and so on is all part of someone’s status.”

Heivia shook his head like he was hungover.

He may have given up on trying to understand the thought process of this thinly-smiling resident of Shit Planet.

“And the problem there is balance.”

But how did Taratua view these disposable Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers?

She looked down on the rain-soaked group from her position of safety.

“Hopefully, the four world powers will begin a mutual game of whack-a-mole that keeps any of them from popping up. The danger is if one of them manages to stay up. I want to restrict their data acquisition speed. That way we alone can grasp these secrets and use them as exclusive bargaining chips against the higher, higher, higher ups. So if any of those moles pops up, we need to whack them back down. Even if our target is from the Information Alliance, we still must thoroughly destroy them. Even more so for outsiders.”

This was sounding ominous.

Heivia, Myonri, and the rest tensed up as Taratua spun the notebook-sized tablet around so they could see the screen.

And it showed...

“A symbol of peace: the Olympia Dome☆”

“Bff...!?”

She was broken.

She was completely insane.

“That artificial floating island travels slowly around the Atlantic and hosts the Technopics global sports festival. It officially claims to be fully neutral and not affiliated with any world power, but it is actually heavily dyed in the colors of the Faith Organization. And since it needs to broadcast an international event, it is equipped with largescale broadcast equipment. That makes it a gigantic EM spy device wandering across the Atlantic. It doesn’t really matter whether or not it was originally built for that purpose. It has ended up that way. It is in our way. You need to whack down that mole so it doesn’t discover the Manhattan 000’s secrets before we do. Blow it up and sink it.”

“...That’s against the rules. You want us to sink the site of the Technopics with military might? That would turn into an international incident requiring centuries of reparations!!”

“That isn’t part of the calculation. Even if you’re right, I won’t be the one paying them. Why do you think I’ve kept you dangerous Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers alive this long? Now get to work, my dead soldiers☆”

She made it sound so simple.

If this was an operation that could be pulled off with the normal methods, she would not have put together this unstable enemy unit of zombie soldiers. She was not expecting Heivia and the others to fight valiantly. They were being used as jokers to whom the rules did not apply specifically because she did not care when they were destroyed either legally or physically.

Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks smiled thinly.

“Luckily, all of our maintenance fleet’s ships were at least half-destroyed by the Manhattan 000’s attack. No one will suspect a thing if a few of them lose control and start to drift. You assisted a stranded Capitalist Corporations’ submarine for no reward, didn’t you? This will be the same. The rules of the sea are kind. So we’ll use that to our advantage by getting the Olympia Dome to

assist you so you can crush them from within.”

Heivia tried to continue arguing, but Taratua gently raised a hand.

The sailors surrounding them lazily aimed shotguns at the curled-up Legitimacy Kingdom dumplings. Heivia might or might not be killed when the first trigger was pulled, but once it began, the number of survivors would be quickly reduced.

Refusal was not an option.

If they disobeyed, they would receive a bullet to the head. If they obeyed, they would be used as disposable elements of ridiculous missions. Even if they managed to win and survive, they would not be freed; they would simply be sent out on the next mission. The death march would continue until every last one of them was dead.



The Asian beauty gently lowered her hand and grinned.

“Do you understand the rules now? Then begin.”

“...Wait.”

A low voice spoke.

It was Heivia as the pouring rain continued to hit him.

“You’re the only one that gains anything from that. It’s not worth our while. We’re risking our life on a deadly attack with guns aimed at our backs. There has to be something in it for us.”

“Using data to achieve a fortune only applies to those in the Information Alliance. Or are you saying you will defect to our side to share in the profits here?”

“Not what I meant,” spat out Heivia. “I’m not interested in your dirty money.”

And he said it.

“Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. Once this is all over, hand that bitch over to us. Those are our terms.”

The tall girl silently tilted her head.

She rubbed at her shiny black hair as she finally answered.

“What do I gain by accepting that? Depending on your answer, I might just return you to your grave.”

“You’re both from the Martini Series, aren’t you? Keep her with you and your share is divided in half.”

“Then you can kill her if you want.”

She said it so easily.

Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks may have had no concept of camaraderie.

No.

Dorothea, Piranirie, and Wraith.

Even that small blonde girl had lost the guarantee of the safety myth. So was it safe to conclude it was a general trait of the Martini Series as a whole? The

one question was whether that was a mistake at the design phase or if it was the result of an outside force taking advantage of a vulnerability.

The tall Asian beauty concluded the briefing with a carefree look.

“So we have a deal☆ Now, 101st Zombie Platoon, this is your first mission, so it is a cause for celebration. It’s time for a true bloodbath mission!”

Part 5

The Frigate 042 was tossed about by the nearly-black gray of the stormy sea. It was about 100 meters long. It would have originally been neatly painted the mix of light gray and blue associated with warships, but large parts had been scorched black and the surface had bubbled up like someone had held a match to the back of a photograph. The rapid-firing guns were bent, the vertical-launch missile tubes lined up like a honeycomb were melted shut, and most of the various antennae had been blown off of the bridge. The entire ship was tilted at an angle, so it was clearly in no state for cruising. If an empty-headed youth came across it in a cruiser, they might snap a photo with their smartphone and create a new ghost ship legend.

Its tragic state was a testament to the power of the Manhattan 000's ultra-wide-range attacks.

"...This is the worst, goddammit."

Inside the ship, Heivia Winchell spat out his words while sitting with his back to the wall and an assault rifle in his arms. He and the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were inside the mess hall that was one of the larger intact areas.

"I'm a noble heir, but those bastards rewrote the records to report me as dead. Those old men with giant beards, fat asses, or both have got to be fighting over the right of succession back in the home country. And who knows what's happened to the relationship between the Winchell and Vanderbilt families..."

"Ch-cheer up, Heivia. We just have to wait for an opportunity."

"You sure are hopeful, Myonri. Do you really think there will be one? With those pieces of shit watching our every move!?"

The zombie-like soldiers slowly turned their attention in the direction Heivia pointed.

There, a single pair of non-matching uniforms stood out from the rest.

It was the Information Alliance officer Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

And the young man who acted as her aide.

“I doubt you’ll trust anything I say at this point. ...But it’s even harder for me to trust myself. Just like with the Capulet AI Network, the Martini Series can’t make judgments about itself.”

“ ... ”

“By spreading its influence thinly out across all of the Information Alliance’s territory of influence, Capulet lost any symbol of a ‘core’. Piranirie said she had succumbed to the AI’s correctness, but it is hard to say she had no confidence in her actions. I don’t know what it is that is destroying us, but it may be using our active self-denial.”

“Active...self-denial?”

Myonri looked confused and Wraith nodded.

“Like giving up on climbing a mountain because of a blizzard. Or making a courageous withdrawal. ...It depends on the person’s willpower, but people have a strange mindset where the stronger their desire, the further they move from their initial objective. That is why Piranirie charged full speed toward her own destruction.”

The blonde girl sighed in the heavy atmosphere.

“Our original, Cassandra Martini, was apparently a rational killer. She must have chosen to give up on so much in the course of that life. If Katarina were here, she might have been able to corroborate that.”

She was acting differently from her previous chatting.

There may have been an absolute difference between Wraith and Heivia’s group.

Of course, Heivia’s group was in charge of hesitantly walking onto the minefield while Wraith’s group was in charge of firing into their backs the instant they took issue with Heivia’s group’s speed or anything else.

“(I can’t believe Taratua. She’s actually sending our reward out into battle with us. Does she see it like shaking a carrot on a stick in front of the dumb horse?)”

“What’s this? You’re acting awfully suspicious here. Did you ask for my head as a reward for this mission?”

“Tch.”

Heivia hatefully clicked his tongue.

It did not matter if she found out here. The secret deal was with Taratua. Even if that girl was broken on a fundamental level, she could still do the math. In other words, she was a high-IQ serial killer. Her “emotions” could not be overturned even if Wraith went crying to her now. It did not matter that they were comrades.

Meanwhile, Wraith sighed.

“You’re apparently clinging to hope to an ugly extent, but that’s fine with me. You can think about what comes afterwards if you like, but don’t lose sight of the immediate hurdle. Taratua has very good reason to be cautious of Olympia Dome. First, if the Manhattan 000 is headed for us, there is a good chance that wandering artificial floating island will pass very close by. Second, the Faith Organization is sending soldiers and equipment to that symbol of peace. Primarily STOL transport planes and tiltrotors. This isn’t over once we get inside with this Trojan horse. Learn how to use the Information Alliance equipment we have lent you. You need to act like you stole it from this half-destroyed ship. Also...”

“Shut up. That’s enough.”

Heivia rudely cut her off.

His tone with her was clearly different from just a few hours before.

“How long are you going to act like we’re on the same side? There’s a really obvious line in the sand now. And you drew it your damn self. You sicken me. Don’t think you can just move from one side to the other whenever you damn well please. It pisses me off even though I know it’s coming from a completely broken lunatic.”

“...Do you think growing emotional is a virtue? I’ll admit it’s pure to a fault, but do you actually plan on surviving this?”

“How the hell can you say that after taking his life with your own hands!? Do you really think you’re the hero? Have you gone as nuts as Joan of Arc? Say it yourself: who do you think it was that shot Quenser to save her own hide!?”

The girl’s shoulders shook at the blatant verbal abuse.

Her already-small body shrank down all the more, but her eyes opened unbelievably wide.

Her lips trembled as she tried to say something. They opened and closed, but nothing ever came out.

“Say it, crazy girl.”

There was now a definite focus to Heivia’s previously gloomy eyes.

There may have been nothing rational there. There was someone here he had reason to criticize, so he may have simply been using that as an outlet.

His back left the wall, he slowly stood up, and a bright light glinted in his eyes as he roared at her.

“Sure, you probably did the right thing!! You probably used that clever head of yours to work out the optimal solution and that told you to shoot Quenser!! So how about you hold your head high? After killing so many people, did you think you could become the tragic heroine who gets tears in her eyes and laments how hard it was for her!? That wouldn’t make him happy. That wouldn’t make Quenser happy. Did you really think anyone would accept that, you piece of shit!?”

“ ... ”

“Do you remember what happened when that damn Manhattan fired on us?”

Wraith remained motionless, so Heivia kept up the verbal assault.

He seemed to be saying he would not forgive her even if her heart lay in tatters.

“He protected you. That skinny bastard threw himself over you to protect

your tiny body from whatever was going to happen. It's true that was right after everything with Piranirie, so he'd just experienced a kid dying. ...But the fact remains that he protected you. Do you know what that means? That softhearted idiot didn't want you to die and he thought he could trust you to have his back! And then you-...!!!!!"

There was a small movement.

It may have been similar to a small child trying to cover their head as an unreasonable adult shouted angrily down at them.

But in Wraith's case, her small hand hovered near the holster on her hip.

The blonde girl winced as if that fact pained her, but Heivia gave a broken, asymmetrical grin.

"...That's who you really are. A crazed killer. And I'm not talking about that active self-denial or some strange mindset. I'm talking about the very nature of your soul. You can claim to support equality or pacifism all you like, but the first hint of a threat and *this happens*. If you aren't on top, you can't relax or even look the other person in the eye. There was no other choice? You're just a child, so you aren't responsible? Then you shouldn't have stretched up on your tiptoes to set foot on the battlefield. None of this would've happened if you hadn't participated in that genius girl project."

He had started on what-ifs that had no bearing on reality.

But Heivia did not care since he was only interested in finding fault.

So he did not hold back.

"You should've stayed back in your safe country hiding behind your mommy's skirt."

This was even more than before.

Everyone watching could tell the girl's pale face grew another shade closer to pure white. It was easy to imagine how tightly her heart was squeezing inside her juvenile body.

Heivia had to have heard Quenser and Wraith's conversation on the Flagship 019.

He would have heard about the DNA computer spread out across the Information Alliance, he would have heard about the Anastasia Processor at its core, and he would have heard whose cancer cells were used to create it.

He would have heard about that impossible what-if where the girl would never have had to take the Martini name and would have been protected by a normal, warm family if not for her mother's sickness.

But he still said it.

He did not care. He only saw her as an enemy.

A military boot could be heard scraping against the floor.

The young man ever-present by Wraith's side had taken a step forward while tightly clenching his teeth.

"Get back to jerking off in front of the position-detection camera with some VR goggles on, you Information Alliance pervert. Did you think you could become her knight now that Quenser's dead?"

Heivia did not back down.

In fact, he immediately stepped forward so they were less than a meter apart.

"What a gentleman you are for bothering to stand up over nothing more than an exchange of words. Well? Am I supposed to fight to the death without a single complaint even after being given legit bullets? Is that how you think a gentleman should act? Go fuck yourself!!!!!"

Next, there were several dull sounds of impacts that crushed flesh and struck the bone.

First, the young man's iron fist hit Heivia's cheekbone. Heivia retaliated by grabbing at him. The rest was too chaotic to describe. The two of them knocked over the mess hall's tables and chairs as they rolled along the floor to get on top of the other. All the while, dull and potentially deadly sounds rang out and dark red drops of blood scattered around.

"...Stop."

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray moved her trembling lips to force out the word.

Neither Heivia nor the young man was listening.

The Legitimacy Kingdom boy grabbed a glass ashtray from the floor and the Information Alliance mechanical man reached for the pin of a grenade hanging from the delinquent soldier's jacket. Seeing that, Wraith finally made up her mind.

"Stop this!!"

She had drawn it.

She drew her handgun from the holster.

The atmosphere froze. A decisive chasm had opened between the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance. If that grenade had detonated, those two and all those gathered in the enclosed mess hall would have been killed. But no one was focused on that.

Everyone there – and that probably included Wraith herself – had pictured something else entirely.

They vividly saw that scene of someone shooting someone else on the tilted flight deck.

"...Do whatever you want." Heivia recklessly threw his hands up while the young man leaned down on him. "You have two options here. One: if the mission fails, you'll be filled with lead at Olympia Dome along with us. Two: if the mission succeeds, Taratua will sell you to us. ...There's no way out for you. Your life is already over, crazy girl."

That was the end of it.

The young man swung his fist down into the center of Heivia's face and the unfunny idiot's consciousness was swiftly taken from him.

Part 6

“Naval Security Sigma 3 to all. We have reached the unidentified ship. It has been sending out a distress signal...but it isn't responding to our radio transmissions, flashing light signals, or loudspeaker calls. Please advise.”

“This is OD Control. Wait, Sigma 3. Olympia Dome lacks the authority to board and raid ships.”

“Sigma 3. Isn't it already within 200 nautical miles?”

“OD Control. An artificial floating island cannot claim territorial waters or an exclusive economic zone. Also, Olympia Dome is neutral in every possible way.”

“(How can you say that after letting in Faith Organization troops like us?)”

“OD Control here. State your call sign before speaking, Sigma 3. We can only board ships that have already sunk. That one is still floating, isn't it? As planned, attach the buffering material and then let the waves carry it into the dock.”

“Sigma 3. They aren't controlling the rudder or decelerating. This might destroy the harbor block.”

“OD Control. Unlike a normal harbor, an artificial floating island can alter its direction and speed. That means we can match our speed to theirs. If they aren't moving, we just have to move.”

“Sigma 3 to all. Starboard bow complete.”

“Theta 7. Port middle complete.”

“Phi 2. Starboard stern complete.”

“Psi 4. Starboard middle complete.”

“Delta 9. Port stern complete.”

“Sigma 3 to Lambda 1. What happened to the port bow?”

“...”

“Lambda 1!”

“Zeta 0 to Sigma 3. Lambda 1 has a phobia of sharks and micro bikinis. It’s all thanks to being swept out to sea when a carnivorous young woman licked her lips and devoured his virginity on a rubber boat. He’s probably off trembling somewhere right now.”

“Sigma 3. How is that traumatic? I’m jealous as hell. I lost mine to the old lady at the cigarette store. I’ll make up for his absence.”

“OD Control here. Trouble, Sigma 3?”

“Sigma 3. Nothing worth saving to the control recorder.”

“OD Control. Then stop discussing your virginities. Just so you know, I’m still afraid of holes in walls. Specifically ones just big enough to hold a nice breakfast banana.”

“Sigma 3 here. Shut up. And we’re done now anyway. What even happened to that cool-headed operator woman? Anyway, match their speed and catch them softly. Softly!”

“OD Control. You don’t have to shout. This entire rescue operation would be pointless if the impact was strong enough to kill the people inside.”

“(Curse these softhearted people who only know peace. Makes it hard to fight a war.)”

“OD Control here. Use your call sign, Sigma 3.”

Part 7

“Thanks for the help” was all they could say.

“Let’s get started.”

On Heivia’s word, the battle began.

Once the Faith Organization had firmly affixed the ship to the harbor block, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes kicked open the bent metal door and rushed out toward the edge of the deck with assault rifles and carbines in hand.

Their first target was the concrete wharf area about 9 meters down from the starboard side of the ship.

A continuous hail of bullets filled the armed Faith Organization soldiers with holes. While exposed to the recoil of the gunfire, Heivia was honestly relieved that they were professional soldiers. If these were simply Olympia Dome staff, this would have been a nightmare.

This was in line with the information they had been given, but he had not been trained to the point that he would thank Taratua for anything. He gave a shout while ducking behind the thick metal panel attached to the railing to swap out his assault rifle’s magazine.

“There’s a sniper on the gantry crane! And if the gathered soldiers start to move apart, that’s the sign for a rocket. Destroy them first!!”

This time, Heivia had a separate shotgun attached below his rifle’s barrel. By swapping between real and rubber bullets, he could neutralize the harmless workers without killing them. Of course, this had nothing to do with mercy or philanthropy. ...It was an efficiency optimization policy that used that “kindness” to lighten the soldier’s trigger finger.

“Don’t get your ammo type mixed up, Myonri. You won’t just get a red or white flag for it!”

“I know that!!”

They exchanged fire for a while, but the Legitimacy Kingdom’s chances of taking the wharf area did not look promising. They would have their best chance when their opponent was surprised by this unexpected attack, but Olympia Dome was the Faith Organization’s home turf and they held all the advantageous ground. Once they recovered from their shock, it would be the Legitimacy Kingdom’s turn to be overwhelmed.

“Is turning the entire slug into a rubber bullet really a humanitarian measure?” asked Myonri.

“It’s mostly just an excuse to yourself. Even if the enemy finds it silly, they can’t respond to the double tactics. Meanwhile, our trigger fingers are a lot lighter since we ‘might not kill them’, so our efficiency rises. It’s the same as the Island Nation’s concept of ‘striking with the back of the blade’. There’s apparently a theory that the samurai could attack so boldly because katanas weren’t double-edged.”

So before they were overwhelmed, they had to thoroughly strike the enemy and secure a foothold on land.

This was an away game and they knew in advance the enemy had more personnel and equipment. They had to throw them off their pace and break through regardless.

Heivia’s group’s enemies were not just those in front of them. They had been warned in advance that they would be shot in the back if they fell behind schedule.

Black-uniformed Wraith was hiding behind a different steel panel from the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes and she shouted at them while pointing toward the area with the most intense counterattack. She was the overall supervisor who was the only one allowed to shoot Heivia’s group in the back. And if Heivia’s group tried to retaliate, they would of course be executed by gunfire. Their actions were restricted by both force and military regulations.

“Avoiding work seems to be the only thing you fools are good at, but set up more of a barrage! I want to throw some more of these things while I can!!”

“Shut up and die, dead-end girl! Will those toys really accomplish anything...!?”

If he did not have to hit, he did not have to expose himself to danger. Heivia kept his body hidden behind the steel panel and stuck only his assault rifle up to randomly spray bullets down. And that made him one of the harder workers. Some of the soldiers were busy “pretending” by creating fake muzzle flashes with a strobe light and speaker linked together. It sounded silly, but unlike in movies, real battles did not have unlimited ammunition. That was a surprisingly handy item for conserving bullets.

“...The creep toward technology has already begun.”

“Oh.” Myonri sounded oddly cheerful. “It looks like those things have started to move.”

Behind her steel panel, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had a focused look on her face as she operated something with both hands. The device looked like a smartphone with a sold-separately H-shaped game pad attached.

No, that may have been exactly what it was.

Something the size of a baseball silently rolled around the Faith Organization’s cover and into their hiding spot.

Immediately, an explosion erupted behind cover as if a fragmentary grenade had gone off there.

The lethal range was 5 meters and the incapacitation range was 10 meters, but those basic specs barely mattered. After a sudden explosion within the wall or vehicle they were hiding within, the people relying on that shield would be blown to bits.

“Wah!? Wha-!?”

Other Faith Organization soldiers behind nearby cover cried out in panic before they were blown away by other explosions that resembled dirty smokescreens. Some soldiers decided they could not stay where they were and rolled out from behind their shields, but Heivia and Myonri picked them off with bullets.

“Remote grenades that can roll along the ground and behind cover? How cruel can you get...?”

“Those simply incorporate the tech from sticky tape cleaning robots, don’t they?”

That was the identity of the devices Wraith had thrown earlier. After scattering the spherical explosives around the targets, you could control their exact locations with a smartphone or tablet. You rolled them behind the enemy’s cover and stealthily detonated them at the defenseless enemy’s feet. They could also be thrown over a prison’s thick walls and sent through a vent to explore the ducts.

“Should we really be relying on tech like this?” asked Heivia.

“They aren’t IoT devices, so they won’t be connected to Capulet,” replied Wraith. “Besides, unmanned weapons run on systems even more simplified than a pet robot. They won’t rely on an AI network.”

“Eh? Really?” asked Myonri.

“It’s true it would take a server with massive capacity to fully reproduce the flowchart for the predetermined movement patterns of the wings and legs of a single fly. ...But what if we were in the middle of nowhere with nothing artificial as far as the eye could see? An unmanned weapon would be useless if it needed to constantly send out signals to inform a server of its location. The ideal form of modern unmanned weapons is generally a submarine. It only sends out a signal when absolutely necessary. Capulet might want to connect to everything and suck up all the data it can get, but even it has to make concessions here.”

Black-uniformed Wraith gave them the pitying look of a teacher to a poor student.

“They use the Insect Colony Theory that takes artificial creatures that learn and construct the simplest ways to move a spider or butterfly’s body and combines it with the swarm intelligence that uses machines to reproduces the social structures of ants and bees. That allows them to communicate and take the optimal action without the need for a server. This is an ideal. Just like a grazing herd, the group of unmanned weapons automatically works toward a single goal while we are the sheepdog who watches on and intervenes only

when necessary.”

“That all sounds wonderful, but I’m more afraid of you going nuts than the machines!” shouted Heivia. “Are you sure this is okay!?”

This was somehow different from Quenser who had shaped bombs with his own hands and used them to realize his clever ideas.

Wraith Martini Vermouthsray’s explosions were merciless and unemotional. It felt like she was trapping the enemy and efficiently killing them.

A motor that sounded a lot like an electric shaver passed by over their heads. They did not bother looking up. It was an aerial drone shaped like a four-winged water strider. Instead of just flying in a straight line, those things would include figure-eight movements, perhaps to divert the enemy’s aim.

Or was it a form of non-EM communication between the unmanned weapons?

It was thanks to these drones that the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had been able to so accurately fire on the Faith Organization soldiers immediately after opening the metal doors. Intelligence was the greatest weapon. The battle was decided before the bullets and knives began to fly. It really was the Information Alliance’s style.

Wraith pointed at the drones being tossed about by the storm.

“If we have them self-destruct at an altitude of 50 meters and rain shrapnel down on the enemy’s head, we should be able to secure a route to C Dock. We need to reach land before enemy reinforcements arrive. Don’t be slow.”

“It doesn’t really matter, but...hey, watch out! Get down, Myonri!!”

Perhaps because of the powerful storm, some of shrapnel downpour reached the ship’s deck as well. After they were nearly decorated with some delicious plastic and rare earth seasoning, Heivia tried to grab at Wraith, but Myonri held him back. A single retort could get them reduced to a bloody pulp right now.

At the moment, time was of the essence.

No gangway had been nicely attached for them, but the actual docking work had been completed. If they descended the ropes attached to the railing, they

could reach the concrete wharf area they had stained with blood a moment before.

They were not searching out each other's position in the jungle or anything, but just to be sure, Heivia made sure not to step in any of the blood.

"I've got a pretty good idea of what kind of shitty tactics the Information Alliance uses, but what about the Faith Organization?"

"Guts maybe?" suggested Myonri. "Like making a gutsy charge?"

Just as Heivia dismissed that as ridiculous, the wall of a nearby warehouse broke open from within. A gigantic firetruck for fuel oil fires had crashed through.

"I don't know if it's for bulletproofing, but they've attached a thick wire mesh over the glass. And it's not just handmade. It's just like the 'observation helicopters' owned by a certain environment protection group. That thing was designed to accommodate this attachment!!"

But that was not the biggest problem. Soldiers were clinging to the sides and roof of the boxy vehicle. They looked like countless ants swinging around a sugar cube. Before Heivia's group even did anything, some of the soldiers were caught on the jagged edges of the warehouse wall or had their uniforms caught in the giant tires, turning them to mincemeat.

It was tank desant.

"Huh, so it is guts," said Heivia.

"Definitely guts," replied Myonri.

Regardless, Heivia raised a hand and one of their allies fired a shoulder-fired anti-tank missile. More than 10 Faith Organization soldiers were blown away like the contents of a jack-in-the-box.

"Shit, they're still alive!?"

They must have mastered the use of willpower and guts because the soldiers lying on the road or on top of the warehouse roof still fired toward the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers.

But that was not why Heivia's group quickly dove behind rusty metal drums

and wooden boxes.

“What is with them...? They’re firing something else along with their bullets.”

“Probably collapsible bows. They take a more arching path than rifle bullets, so be on your guard even when behind cover. It’s the same as you diligent and clever lot using both rifle bullets and rubber bullets. Individually, they wouldn’t be that effective, but mix them in and the enemy has to perform more mental gymnastics.”

“That’s not what I was talking about, crazy girl. Look at the arrowhead over there. Why have they rubbed seagull shit all over it!?”

“Maybe as a form of poison arrow? They probably hope to increase the damage done by shoving germs into the wound. The military use of rotten corpses and excrement is an effective strategy that has been used since BCE times.”

“Heivia, look at that on the road over there,” said Myonri. “Wow, I don’t want to see that at all. Isn’t that just the worst!?”

“Don’t just say ‘that’! Explain what it is!! ...!? W-wait, you’re kidding, right? Not dogshit!”

It did not at all look like they were kidding and little Wraithy did not want a face full of dogshit, so she threw a baseball-sized explosive. The blonde girl operated her smartphone’s H-shaped game pad while hiding behind cover to blow up the Faith Organization soldier groaning on the ground 20 meters away.

“You idiot!! You just scattered dogshit and human entrails everywhere!! Be more careful!!”

“I feel like this is turning into biological warfare,” commented Myonri.

Just then, they sensed what seemed like a sound but was not. A slight vibration reached their feet from the ground.

They frowned.

“What’s this? Cheering from a stadium?”

“Why would it be that?” asked Myonri. “I thought this city was essentially dead except during the Technopics.”

“Can you professionals not even find a scientific explanation of the occult?” complained Wraith. “The winds and waves of the storm may be causing a resonance within the artificial floating island. It is not rooted in the actual earth, so looking at the overall ratio, it must be thinner than a pizza.”

“Don’t butt in, Loli Grim Reaper. I’m not a pedo or a necro.”

“There’s no need to lie.”

“And don’t just smile and say things like that, Myonri! People will think it’s true!!”

But in reality, a powerful vibration erupted in the distance and reached them like someone had scored a decisive point near the end of a soccer game. There was no way this was a natural phenomenon. The sound of mayhem had human intent behind it.

“...So is it really guts after all?” asked Myonri, sounding annoyed.

“Curse those perverted mythology fetishists. Did they start some self-loving to blow through the limiters in their minds!?”

The digital vs. analog war had finally begun.

Heivia’s group was not trying to remain in C Dock and protect the ship with their lives, so they had no reason to stay in place and put up a thorough resistance. Instead, they moved elsewhere.

Wraith looked up from her customized smartphone.

“Our objective is the broadcast station where most of the communication equipment is. We can ignore the broadcast tower and parabolic antennae. As long as we destroy the core, they can’t manage the exchange of information and that other equipment will be useless.”

“Wait, that’s not what we discussed. I thought that Martini sister you love so much was talking about sinking the whole damn island. Unlike you, we could get executed by Taratua if we make a single wrong move!”

“I can’t believe how little you can adapt to the situation... What does it matter what she hopes for? Can your poor little mind do nothing more than what it’s told? Besides, we don’t even know if it’s possible to sink Olympia Dome as a

whole with the equipment we're carrying. Most of its power is supplied by the generator satellite in orbit and the transformer ships in the ocean, so we can't expect to trigger any explosives within Olympia Dome. The Faith Organization military infiltrating the artificial floating island doesn't matter. Our top priority is robbing the Manhattan 000 of the ability to gather information."

"Sure, sure. How kind of you. Such a pillar of charity. Is that the spirit of Nightingale I see hovering behind you? I'm sure Quenser is weeping for joy in the afterlife right now, you piece of shit."

The aide young man punched Heivia and Heivia returned the favor.

Before it devolved into a serious grapple, timid Myonri aimed her assault rifle at those allies to restore order.

"This isn't supposed to be my job!" she protested. "Wraith, please manage our people better!"

"R-right..."

"Just shoot him, you idiot!" shouted Heivia. "Whose side are you on, anyway!?"

"If you don't quiet down, I will fire rubber bullets into your balls. Then the rest of us can keep moving while the two of you bond over your shared experience. Nonlethal weapons sure are convenient, aren't they?"

She was smiling.

Was she aware that rubber or not made little difference when it came to balls? Myonri seemed to have awoken to her calling as a fearsome Black Uniform. This was another example of how frightening serious girls were when they got mad.

"...Is there some kind of special campaign in effect this month? When did plain old Myonri transform into this shiny ultra-rare?"

"I imagine it was the result of everyone's daily treatment of me."

"You have some nerve, Myonri. What good is an ultra-rare if you aren't even going to show any more skin?"

"That's what I'm talking about! Everything about your treatment of me is the

worst!!”

They left the harbor block and entered the outer city region.

It was probably due to the thick storm clouds overhead, but the city looked very gray in the pouring rain.

“Are you sure we aren’t dragging civilians into this...?”

“There are apparently no athletes or spectators here except during the Technopics. The only civilians are the Olympia Dome inspection and maintenance staff. The city’s population density is less than 8%, so there’s very little chance of a stray bullet causing any harm.”

“I read you loud and clear: we don’t actually know anything for sure and we need to be careful if we want to avoid a nightmare later on.”

They heard the dull sound of several thick tires tearing at the ground. Garbage trucks and mobile cranes drove out from intersections and parking garages like crocodiles poking their heads out of the bushes. Soldiers covered them like a packed train in Southeast Asia, and...

“Oh, no! They’ve attached heavy weaponry with bolts and slide rails!!”

“Look how perfectly those fit. This is clearly how they were designed to look. They just normally have the equipment removed so those look like civilian equipment!! With the infrastructure support of a frontline base, they’re just military weapons!!”

In this case, it was heavy machineguns instead of construction equipment. If Heivia’s group remained standing in that wide-open six-lane road the size of a runway, they would have their torsos torn in half by a horizontal flash of light.

Driven on by the deep booms of gunfire, Heivia’s group broke the window to one of the shops lining the road and fled indoors.

Only after rushing inside did they realize it was a trendy bar.

“Damn, this is no time to let a horizontal stream of bullets hold us in place. They’ve broken through the limiters in their minds to free themselves from the fear of death. They’re sure to charge in at us!!”

“Do not worry, cowardly expert. This beautiful and kind young woman will

wear down their numbers for you.”

Wraith sounded oddly confident. Thinking back, Heivia recalled that her aide had fired a 25mm grenade launcher straight up several times as they ran.

Or...?

“Parachute deployment confirmed. We have access to all rounds. None were lost. We can begin at any time.”

“Understood, Frank. Mark the heat readings around the engines and start by blowing away all of the modified vehicles.”

It happened after a 10 second delay.

A deafening explosion erupted outside with enough force to drown out the deep gunshots of the heavy machineguns that reverberated in their stomachs. And it was not just the one. Wraith’s smartphone was linked with the cameras of the grenades slowly swept up by the blasts, so when she set their targets, the explosives released their own parachutes, used their small wings for course corrections, and fell directly on the garbage trucks and mobile cranes with pinpoint accuracy. Their guidance was perfect despite the storm and the speed of the vehicles.

“Exactly the scary stuff I would expect from a crazy girl...” grumbled Heivia as he realized what it meant that the heavy machineguns had been entirely silenced.

Those grenades could be fired at random and individually locked onto targets later on. That was not something he could freely celebrate. He hated to think what would happen if they showed up in the enemy’s hands. This was an urban battlefield with roofs for protection, but an attack from above would be devastating out on an open field.

But Wraith herself did not seem delighted with her incredible results.

“Instead of worrying about their obvious active forces, you should focus on their passive enemy-location infrastructure. In other words, how did they know where we were? The Faith Organization is supposed to be dangerous in a simple way, but have they moved past their outdated analog warfare? Unless we take out their ‘eyes’, they’ll quickly reclaim the initiative.”

The stadium cheering erupted from unexpectedly close by.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“They’re coming. And they’ll have learned to hold back their special pieces to avoid having them crushed by explosives.”

“Wh-what does that mean?” asked Myonri.

“They’ll push in with overwhelming numbers! They’ll use their allies as shields and climb over the corpses!!”

When she heard Heivia’s words, Wraith took out one of the serverless remote grenades she had used at the harbor block and placed it among the jumble of drink bottles behind the counter.

Then they all left through the back exit.

They could not deny the fear of facing more heavy weaponry, so they did their best to choose the alleyways and small roads that garbage trucks, mobile cranes, and other large vehicles could not drive down.

“Keep an eye on the windows above and the manholes below. Urban areas that can’t be leveled are crucibles of death...”

Wraith ignored Heivia’s words and used her smartphone to check the camera footage from the remote grenade she had set up. A crowd resembling a rioting mob more than soldiers flooded inside the shop through the door and the broken window and trampled everything within.

Wraith spotted a distinctive tattoo on the backs of their hands.

“Aztec? ...No, it’s Mayan, but is that an even older god?” The blonde girl gently rubbed her slender chin with her empty hand. “We can’t take them lightly just because they’re from an ancient civilization. Their largescale stone architectures and accurate astronomy was supported by a high-level of scientific learning. Their idea of crafting giant structures with an accurate hand could apply to modern Object development.”

“Can you look up how to use the ultimate magic with that thing? If not, it’s a waste of time. What a joke.”

The young man responded by quietly clenching his fist and showing off his

large bicep bulge, so Wraith kicked her aide in the shin without even looking up from her smartphone. She had learned how to put a stop to it by now. Blonde 12-year-old girls had endless possibility for growth.

“W-Wraith, can you at least look up from that screen?” suggested Myonri. “Handle it so halfheartedly and you’ll probably make him feel bad. This isn’t much of a reward.”

“It’s a good lesson for him. This is what happens when he tries to speak for someone as lovely as me with his dimwitted and sweaty masculinity.”

One of the many soldiers in the shop seemed to have noticed the camera, so Wraith tapped the screen to swiftly detonate the remote grenade. The screen simply displayed the text “Access Lost”, but there had actually been an explosion in the middle of that crowd. Small metal balls only a few millimeters across had been scattered in every direction to take lives as efficiently as possible.

“The drones flying above have detected the movement of a different unit. Simply fleeing will not shake them.”

“How many?”

“First of all, about 200 managed to pass through the bar and are pursuing us from behind.”

“...Hey, do you have so many brain chemicals pumping that you’ve forgotten how to do math?” complained Heivia. “We’re lucky if we still have 50 people. An enemy four times our size is too much.”

“And there are more than 300 approaching up ahead. The enemy is about 10 times our size and who can say how much larger it will grow.”

Regardless of the soldiers’ skill and equipment, the difference in numbers was simply too great. They had already used up the advantage provided by a surprise attack, so at this rate, they would be ganged up on and slaughtered.

While Wraith relayed this information with her smartphone in one hand, she pulled a few disks from her pocket and threw them. They were a little larger than movie disks and, when they fell to the ground, they came apart on their own and transformed into meter-long serpentine robots. It was unclear how

closely their structure matched that of a snake, but when the head portion tapped against the ground, was it reading the heat to communicate with the other units?

“The worst case is to be trapped between two forces on this small road. Staying on this annoyingly straight path would be the absolute worst plan. It would be better to move out onto the major road to include a lateral vector to our path. We should bend the battle line so we’re only being attacked from a single direction.”

“U-umm, are those robots explosives too?” asked Myonri.

The robots wriggled like endoscopes as they either wrapped around vertical pipes to climb to the rooftops or slipped underground through the small holes in manholes.

Wraith answered with her eyes still on her smartphone screen.

“No, these are high-speed cameras. The cameras themselves have been made quite small by making them mirrorless, but blurring is a major issue. They can somewhat correct using their gyros, but then there’s no point in making them high speed. The engineers are apparently still having a hard time making flying versions.”

“Cameras...?”

“Yes. In an away game like this, we can’t help but be outnumbered. So to make up for what we lack, I was thinking we could play some soccer. Baseball and basketball would work just as well. As long as we have viewpoints from around 32 directions on the X, Y, and Z axes, we should manage well enough.”

“???”

Part 8

“Goddamn them...!!”

Sigma 3, real name Robinson King-Cole, groaned within the rubble of the harbor block. They had tried to be very cautious, but this was the result as soon as that crumbling ship entered C Dock. The zombies had flooded out from the Trojan horse and bared their fangs against the symbol of peace known as the Olympia Dome. It had been quickly transformed into a battlefield reeking of gun smoke and blood.

The large Hispanic man looked up at the crumbling ship that was more than 9 meters tall. The ship itself seemed to be from the Information Alliance, but the flag raised above it was the Legitimacy Kingdom’s.

“Sigma 3 to OD Control. Who are they!? Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers that captured an Information Alliance ship, Information Alliance soldiers disguising themselves as the Legitimacy Kingdom, or someone else altogether!?”

Many varieties of rifle and shotgun cartridges were lying around. Yet normally there would be a single standard used within a unit.

(There’s so much evidence here, but it feels like that’s actually obscuring the truth. It’s always like this when the Information Alliance’s name pops up!!)

Robinson felt a physiological disgust at a level above reason, but that may have been because he belonged to the Faith Organization that saw value in a single absolute truth. He simply could not understand the people who used post-truth politics and fake news to muddy the truth and make all sorts of noise.

After regrouping with some fellow soldiers who had also arrived on personal watercraft, they ran along the dock, checked the pulses of their collapsed allies, stopped the worst of the bleeding and attached GPS tags to those who were still breathing, and moved on to the next one.

Leaving the harbor block did not wake them from the nightmare.

They smelled smoke, gunpowder, and death.

The ominous odor of the city before them could not be washed away by the blowing rain.

(This is awful...)

It would be easy enough to hate the enemy for this, but it was Robinson's group that had allowed this to happen. The fact that they had just been following orders did not soothe his conscience. Bringing that ship to C Dock and stationing themselves at Olympia Dome in the first place were both the Faith Organization's decisions.

"Sigma 3 to OD Control. Send the plan to me too. I want to join the battle, but what kind of operation are we running!? OD Control!!"

"...Oh, Zeus, god of life and punishment. Your pure shrine maiden beseeches thee. Lend us the power that once guarded Olympus to send lightning upon the villains who would lay waste to your modern temple..."

"Dammit!!"

That female operator usually kept a head as cool as ice, but she had driven her mind to an elevated state with that flat and expressionless prayer. Robinson and the others in charge of the actual combat were professional soldiers, but the people monitoring communications and making decisions based on a variety of regulations were civilians who were only meant to inspect and maintain the sports facilities. They could not necessarily endure the pressure of knowing their decisions could lead to so many deaths.

(The damage is spreading throughout the entire city. I doubt *just* the intruders could cause all this. Did the ground troops cut their limiters and begin a war of attrition?)

Robinson's group had not rushed to the Olympia Dome in response to the Manhattan issue. There had not been enough time for that.

It was more accurate to say they had happened to be in the right place at the right time while making their near-standard naval resupply stop.

(If we had predicted things that well, we could have handled this better! Curse the Manhattan. It just shows up and then starts scattering disaster everywhere. Who are we even fighting against here!? Are they trying to protect that thing or destroy it!?)

This had all been a stroke of good luck in the first place. It was entirely coincidental that they had acquired the closest base to Manhattan without having to risk their lives for it. And yet they had been told that revealing the purpose and value of Manhattan was a mission that had to succeed even if it cost them their lives. Their lives were being thrown away for the whims of their higher ups who had been blinded by greed. That was Robinson's blunt assessment.

They were up against a faceless enemy.

That was a threat on the same level as some strange form of the occult.

(And when we were already transporting *something so dangerous*... What even happened to our original mission, dammit!?)

"What should we do, Sigma 3?" asked the large female soldier next to him while she stared off into the distance. "Should we cut the circuits in our minds too?"

"...No," spat out Robinson. "If this were the ending god had given us, then so be it, but both sides here are no more than human. I'm not about to die for human greed. We'll regroup with the main unit. I don't care about that digital war nonsense. We have an overwhelming advantage in numbers, so as long as we keep our cool, we should be able to win this."

Part 9

Even when they knew it was the best course of action, abandoning cover and running out into an open area was not good for their hearts. Do not break any branches, do not step in the mud, do not cast a long shadow, do not press up against doors or walls, do not shine your light on mirrors or windows – there was a lot of “etiquette” to something as simple as walking, but actual war did not always allow you to follow the textbook for all of those little things.

The situation was awful.

“Run, Myonri! No one can complain if they’re shot in the back now!!”

“But Jonathan was-...”

“Just run!!”

Trying to rescue someone in this open space would only get them shot too. And this soldier had been shot on his center line such that it probably shattered his spine, so there was nothing they could do. They could only clench their teeth and shake free of their regret.

They ran across the runway-like six-lane road and entered the subway station building on the opposite side. Only after diving behind the closest wall did Heivia take in a large gulp of air.

“Pant, pant! Goddamn them. Did they at least shoot Wraith!?”

“You will be sad to hear I am alive and kicking.”

“Oh, hell. Well that proves that it’s the good people who die first...”

Near the entrance, there was a vending machine from a major online store that was forcing its way into the market, so Heivia blew away its earthquake-resistant bolts with his rifle and knocked it over as a barricade as he seriously spat out those words.

But now it was time for the rioting Faith Organization soldiers to suffer. If they simply pursued, they would have to cross the same road that had exposed Heivia's group to such danger.

"If they really have cut their mental limiters, they'll push their way through even if we fire 5.56mm rounds at a rate of 700 a minute. Modern warfare is all about smart tactics, but there's nothing we can do if a large army is willing to step on their comrades' corpses and cross a river of blood. I'm sure you know why the directional landmines that scatter small metal balls in a fan shape were developed."

"Yes, I am aware," said Wraith. "Keep an eye on the subway tunnels and emergency exits. The drones are not enough to fully grasp the distribution of these aggressively generic enemy soldiers."

"Th-this is an artificial island floating in the ocean, isn't it...?" asked Myonri.

"And? Just like with a ship, the lower the center of gravity the better. In marine construction, child-bearing hips and a large ass are more highly valued than giant tits, so they would have wanted the island to be a little thicker for the added weight."

Wraith snapped her fingers and the young man next to her provided the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers with a few items the size of baseballs. They were more of the serverless remote grenades.

"Use them more as 'eyes' than explosives since a frag grenade can't pierce that shield of flesh. They can also be used to flood the underground area in case that large army tries to push in from below."

"That kind of trick isn't my area of expertise. Hey, someone put together a unit of combat engineers. You help too, Quen..."

Heivia stopped mid-sentence and clicked his tongue.

He scratched his head in an awkward silence.

"...Never mind. Myonri, you're skilled with your hands, right? Would you rather stand out front in the path of that hail of bullets, or move to the back and set things up there? Select 10 people you can use and seal off all the entrances. Hurry! This enemy isn't kind enough to wait until the transformation

scene is over!!”

A muffled explosion rang out outside and the shockwave shattered a few of the windows bordering the main road.

Jonathan had been unable to get up as the Faith Organization soldiers had approached to secure their prisoner, so he had mustered his last ounce of strength to pull the pin on a grenade.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“Damn, it’s already started!!”

“Prepared or not, we have to respond.”

Heivia hid behind the collapsed vending machine and Wraith hid behind a bookstore cart that carried a stack of unsold magazines taller than she was. Both of them aimed their weapons outside.

The explosion seemed to have pushed their excitement over a line. With the roar of a battle scene in a knight movie, Faith Organization soldiers flooded the large street that panoramically filled their vision.

There were people, people, people, and more people.

The thick wall pushed in with such force that it was easy to forget that each gunshot fired toward it was taking a human life. Dark red blood and flesh flew, the soldiers on the front line collapsed, and countless boots trampled their allies’ bodies before they had even stopped breathing.

This was different again from the nightmarish mission led by Piranirie Martini Smoky. Instead of being threatened into it, these people were charging in of their own free will.

“This is just the worst!!!!!!” said Heivia.

“It really is a vision of hell,” agreed Wraith. “I feel silly reminding you of something so basic, but coordinate your magazine changes so the barrage never stops. If the density of bullets thins out, they’ll push in all at once.”

She hatefully spat out the words, but her movements were accurate as could be.

And while calmly firing on the soldiers running out into the road like a sensor-controlled machine, Wraith said something without looking over at Heivia.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Is that supposed to be foreshadowing an emotional sacrificial charge or something? If not, then shut your mouth, crazy girl, because your words are meaningless to me. Your sentimentality is as ridiculous as blood-type fortunetelling, so don’t think it takes away my right to hold a grudge!!”

Static reached Heivia’s ears.

Then a voice came over the radio.

“They’ve put together a unit aside from the one crossing the road. They’re circling around to reach the station from the west entrance while you’re focused on the main group!”

“Are you kidding me...!?”

“It’s hardly surprising when they have so many people to work with,” said Wraith. “And lowering the metal shutters isn’t going to stop them at this point. Yes, don’t randomly spread out your forces. No matter what kind of clichéd new truths come to light, the station will still be filled with blood if they break through the front.”

“Then what are we supposed to do!? They’re coming from behind. Are we supposed to just sit here and keep fighting until they shoot us in the ass!?”

“Were you not listening? I said not to *randomly* spread out your forces.”

Wraith emphasized the one word while waving a 5-inch monitor in the hand not holding her gun. It was her beloved smartphone.

“Those snake robots can find filming spots without the map data of a server, so I’ve been observing the battlefield from 32 directions to accurately analyze the enemy’s small idiosyncrasies using the high-speed cameras. That’s 10,000 frames a second. And thanks to their battle of attrition using such great numbers, I’ve gathered an incredible amount of data in a very short time. Charge, retreat, diversion, coordination – the big data is boiling in the magic pot. And it’s about time to take a look at the whole.”

“...Is that really going to make a dramatic difference?”

“This is the Information Alliance style and it works for any kind of group sports. That said, the data is useless without enough people to work with. A single director can’t do everything on her own even with the optimal answer in hand. So will you obey me and live, or defy me and die? The choice is yours, my dear sworn enemy.”

Heivia hatefully clicked his tongue and forced out some words while creating a pile of corpses from the Faith Organization troops outside.

“...You can do as many good deeds as you want now. It won’t change a thing.”

“That’s fine. I never said I didn’t want to die. I just said I don’t want to die here.”

They had a plan.

The black-uniformed girl took the overall command role.

“Frank, fire more of those grenades into the air. Five should do it for now. Send them between the troops in the road and those preparing to enter the road to crush and separate them with the blasts.”

“Understood.”

“Once those in the road can neither advance nor withdraw, mow them down with your assault rifles. It’s the same as keeping water pipes clean: the charge can continue because of the constant ‘flow’, but once it stops, the fear of death will come rushing back. The slightest stop is all we need.”

“Are you serious?” complained Heivia. “I thought psychology was as much a superstition as tarot readings.”

“Since you have yet to evolve beyond an ape, I will respectfully answer you. It is human nature to be distracted by detours when the way ahead is blocked. Their secondary candidate is the western entrance. Once the pressure here has been reduced, send out three groups with shoulder-fired missiles. Their secondary unit is a minority, so if we blow up their front line right away, we can stop their momentum.”

The difference in overall numbers was 50 against 500 or even more.

When outnumbered by more than four to one, they should have been overwhelmed regardless of each individual's strength.

However.

To put it another way...

"We don't have to look at the overall numbers. We only need to recalculate the localized human density," proclaimed Wraith while looking down at the smartphone screen inserted into the H-shaped gamepad. "Sports data analysis thoroughly analyzes the idiosyncrasies of the players. Once you have detailed information on how individuals and teams handle offense, you know where to focus your defense. That allows you to reveal everything about the situation. It's the same in soccer, basketball, baseball, and hockey. This is a simple matter of applying that to war instead."

Even if the overall difference in Olympia Dome was 50 against 500, that did not necessarily apply to the numbers that clashed at any one time. By judging the timing, using the terrain, and firing bullets and bombs to divide the enemy into groups of ten or fewer, the Legitimacy Kingdom would have the advantage of superior numbers against those individual groups.

Of course, they would never pull that off if they simply fought at random. Shouting that they would overcome the difference in numbers was the same as relying on guts.

This tactic was only possible because they had high-speed cameras thoroughly filming everything from 32 directions, international competition level algorithms analyzing that footage, and soldiers who could follow the enemy arrangement and distribution, move as the information on the screen told them to, and turn that ideal into a reality.

The statistics in the data began to encroach on the real scene before them.

It was stagnation.

This did not just apply to the Faith Organization soldiers' charge across the road. The excited energy between them rapidly cooled, their momentum faltered, and the fear of death and the confusion was clearly spreading among them once more. Even though that general "atmosphere" should have been

invisible.

“Stop firing for 5 seconds.”

“?”

“We’ll give them a moment of relief before throwing them back into deadly danger. It’s just like getting in a hot bath before being thrown right back out into the midwinter night. That’s the most effective means of shaking them. Resume firing.”

Heivia’s short burst of fire caused a previously-unseen change.

One young soldier out in the road came to a stop, turned around, and tried to run back to the alley from which he had come.

“That woke him up,” coldly said Wraith.

She saw the change, but she did not instruct the soldiers to cease firing.

“All that about their mental limiters was a temporary thing. No matter your beliefs or convictions, forgetting the instinctual fear of death is not a natural state for a living creature. So we just have to control that on/off switch. Once this unwanted look at reality has taken away their purity, they cannot rebuild the resolve to trample their allies’ corpses and cross that river of blood.”

“Thanks for the lecture, but what do we do now!?”

“The minority pushes back against the majority. Instead of that young soldier himself, shoot a few nearby soldiers in the head. Seeing familiar faces destroyed and feeling their blood splattering on him will be more effective. Once the fear of death makes him panic and he starts to scream, the rest will come quickly.”

It was like throwing oil on a fire.

Their coordination clearly crumbled. There were cracks running through that army which had been like a solid wall before. Heivia’s group only had to use sporadic fire to widen those rifts. The enemy was shoving each other to avoid being on the front line and some fistfights were even breaking out.

“They’re just a chaotic crowd now,” cruelly said Wraith. “Finish them off.”

“You’re really scaring me.”

They did not even need to shoot all the remaining soldiers. Simply aiming their assault rifles in that direction produced short shrieks as the soldiers ignored their orders and fled.

“Should we go after them? It’d be a pain if they regrouped and regained their cool.”

“It’s quite the opposite. The calmer people are, the more they remember the fear of death. Give them time, and the fear of death will ensnare their mind like a nightmare. In fact, if we try to deal with them individually, we will lose. Have you forgotten how outnumbered we are? Plus, we only have so much ammo. Data analysis is not all powerful and its effects only show themselves in a limited arena.”

Their goal had always been to blow up the broadcast station that supported the Olympia Dome’s largescale broadcast infrastructure (which could be seen as an EM spying facility that indiscriminately gathered signals from the surrounding area). Using up all their ammunition before arriving there would be meaningless.

Wraith made a casual decision like she was staring at a schedule book.

“We were lucky to rout them like this at all. They didn’t see through our trick. It will take some time for them to prepare for combat once more after abandoning victory of their own volition. Let’s achieve our objective and leave the Olympia Dome before that happens.”

After gathering their dead comrades’ dog tags, Heivia’s group left the subway station and resumed the journey to the broadcast station. Since it was a large facility, the giant boxy building was visible from a distance. They were of course cautious in their approach, but the sense of having cleared the largest hurdle enveloped the Legitimacy Kingdom survivors like a cradle.

However...

“What...is this?”

“?”

Heivia gave Wraith a puzzled look when she uttered a low comment toward her smartphone screen. What was that small LCD screen connected to and what

was it displaying?

“There’s...there’s no way they overlooked this!! Did Taratua just decide not to tell us!?”

She seemed to be cursing someone.

And at the same moment, a 50m mass passed by in the sky over their heads.

Their eyes could see it, but their brains refused to accept it.

For one thing, its position made no sense.

It was above all the high-rise buildings in the city. A mass of steel mixed with a heat-resistant reactive substance was positioned at an altitude of more than 200 meters. It was floating. It was flying. If the spherical main body was viewed as the earth, then the 3 Y-shaped wings were attached at the equator. Were those coaxial rotors? The two sets of wings rotated in opposite directions, one clockwise and the other counterclockwise, to free the 200,000-ton mass from the bonds of gravity like a helicopter. There was something like an undercarriage, but could that even be used to move it? The equilateral triangle below it was like a helicopter’s skids or an upside-down version of the tripod used to support the bottom of a pot or frying pan on a gas burner. It may have only been meant to let it take off and land.

“An...”

This was no time to just stare in shock.

It had moved into position above Heivia’s group. Which meant...?

“An Object!?”

A moment later, the colossal weapon that had ended the nuclear age began its *attack*.

Part 10

Why had that information been kept from them?

Far away on a relatively-intact cruiser, Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks answered her aide's question with a smile.

“Because I have no real reason to be their friends☆”

Part 11

All sound had vanished.

Heivia had no idea what had happened.

“Bwahh, ahhhhhh!!!??? Abfweah!!”

Something had fallen from directly above and crushed the subway station building like a cardboard box. Then, like drawing a thick line along the ground, the reinforced concrete building and asphalt road were destroyed and a cascade of destruction pressed in on the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes.

It was like a child crushing a line of ants below their shoe.

Heivia just barely escaped the threat.

Something cut by horizontally in front of him and familiar faces were transformed into red and black stains.

“Get indoors!!”

The extreme situation had left Heivia in a daze, but Wraith’s shout acted like a slap to the face.

“They’re placing the metal balls used for grenades and mines inside the ridiculously powerful artificial air current used to keep that 200,000-ton mass afloat and firing them down from that height. If you don’t want to be torn apart by that deadly waterfall, then run!!”

Heivia still could not react, so Myonri grabbed his limp hand.

“Let’s go! We can’t just die here!!”

“...”

Something else happened before he could say anything.

A different shockwave hit Heivia and the others from above. Their legs could

not support them and they were sent rolling across the asphalt. They looked up from the ground just in time to see all of the high-rise buildings' windows shatter and a downpour of glittering glass enter the sky.

“Dammit!!”

This time, Heivia picked up Myonri and crawled below a nearby truck. An ear-splitting cacophony followed. The glass downpour was crashing into the ground.

“What happened to Wraith? Did she actually die this time?”

“She’s waving from behind cover over there. More importantly, what was that just now?”

If the Object was simply launching a cruel attack on the ground, it only had to use that same combination of wind and metal balls. The glass was merely a side effect of something. This only made sense if it had done something else.

A low rumbling and shaking finally reached them.

They were confused at first, but it slowly dawned on them.

“It was firing something...no, it was a shockwave. That was all it took to shatter all the glass here...”

“But there wasn’t anything like a main cannon,” said Myonri.

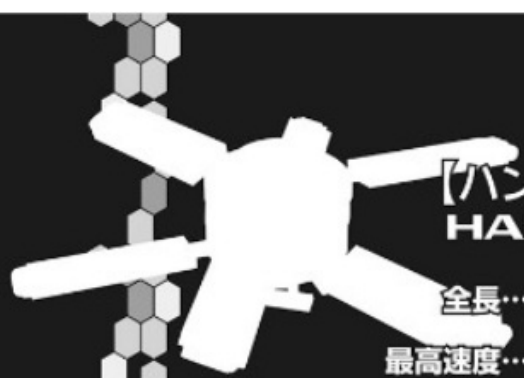
“Damn, we have no idea how it works without Quenser here. And we can’t come up with a weird name for it without our busty commander. Yeah, that settles it. I’m definitely groping those tits later on since she ran off and left us!!”

“I get that your lust won out over your friendship there, but could you at least put me down before saying things like that?”

Since the enemy could crush a tall, reinforced-concrete building like it was a cardboard box, staying in one spot would be a bad idea, so Heivia and Myonri crawled out from below the truck.

“Hey,” said Wraith when they regrouped. “How were you planning to escape?”

“What?”



【ハンマースロウ001】
HAMMER THROW001

全長…170メートル

最高速度…時速650キロ

装甲…2センチ×500層(溶接など不純物含む)

用途…拠点強襲制圧兵器

分類…空戦専用第二世代(戦闘・攻撃機能併用)

運用者…「信心組織」

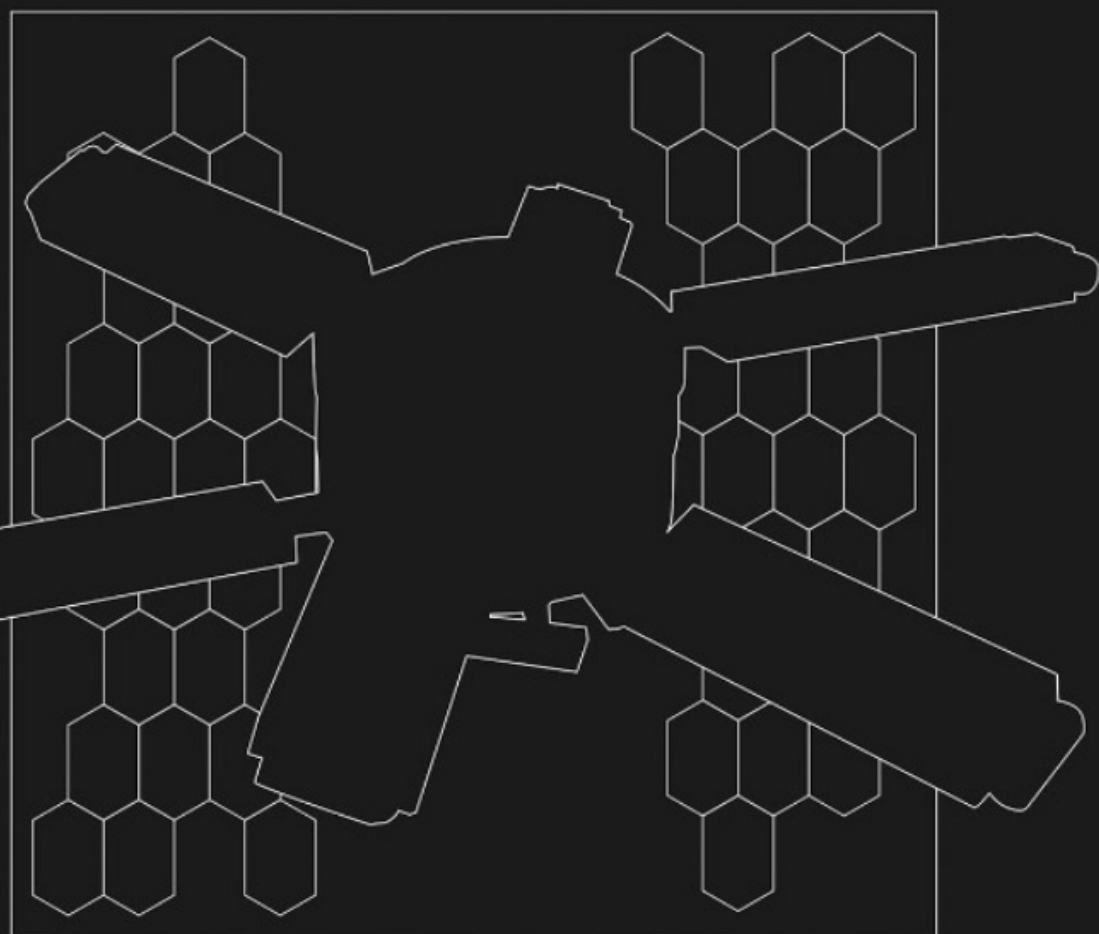
仕様…二重反転ローター

主砲…遠心力式投弾砲×3

副砲…直下空爆用小鉄球投下兵装×1

コードネーム…なし(『正統王国』では把握されておらず)、
「情報同盟」ではハンマースロウ001、
「信心組織」公式にはイシュ・チェル

メインカラーリング…グレー



HAMMER THROW001

“That came from the harbor block. In a reliable but boring move, I imagine that thing fired its main cannon on the Frigate 042 in C Dock. Those of us here in Olympia Dome will be next. If you had personal watercraft or submersibles loaded on that ship, we need to find a new method.”

“I-its main cannon!? But there was no sign of that...”

“It used the coaxial rotors that support it. It probably has giant, heavy-metal shells loaded inside it like a handgun magazine. Those things have a rotation speed high enough to support 200,000 tons. It only has to open the end of the magazine and release the shell within. Just imagine the destructive power of using centrifugal force to throw a shell like a meteor.”

A storm of small metal balls launched downward by the wind and giant heavy-metal shells launched into the distance using centrifugal force. That left the Faith Organization’s flying Object with no bind spots. There was nowhere they could hide that it could not fire on them.

“Are you kidding? This really is a nightmare...”

“Is it? This seems better than if they had attached a laser cannon to the end of the main rotor and sliced us to pieces with that rotating blade. Would you prefer to be chased by an infinitely-expanding circular saw?”

Wraith nonchalantly upgraded the nightmare while protected by the aide young man. The history giving form to her imagination had to be insane.

“Centrifugal force, shell throwing...no, it might be better to think of it like the hammer throw. Yes, for now, let’s use the enemy codename of Hammer Throw 001.”

“We have to call it that too? We just keep getting more and more influenced by the shitty Information Alliance method.”

“Yes, it is hard to say we are a perfect world power. The one who holds the most information is the winner, but so many idiots misunderstand that concept to the point that they think the sign of the privileged class is cutting off all information to the point that you can buy a private beach in Miami and swim in the nude. All the bored young wives with ringlet-curls are turning into nudists who claim to aspire to a natural lifestyle.”

“Are you just clueless, or are you trying to win me over!?”

“Please, can someone take this seriously!? Our lives are on the line here!!”

Myonri pleaded with them, but she had not taken into account the possibility that the idiots were trying to avoid facing the intense fear before them.

And the Hammer Throw 001 no longer had a distant target to prioritize.

It would be their turn soon.

Myonri’s shout had dragged Heivia back to reality, so he felt sweat on his brow.

“...What do we do?”

What would that boy who was not here have done at a time like this?

What would Quenser Barbotage have done?

“What the hell are we supposed to do!?”

A moment later...

It fell.

The flying Object that had been looking down on them dropped far too easily.

“.....
Ah?”

Heivia’s thoughts could not keep up with the crazy sight before him.

But it was no illusion.

After a brief delay, an incredible storm of destruction was thrown out in all directions. More than just the glass, entire groups of buildings were knocked over this time. And it was more than just a shockwave. The connections between the dice-like floating objects made of aluminum and stainless steel were smashed and shaken.

“Ohhhhhhwhah!?”

Shouting was not going to accomplish anything.

The fact that the ground could softly “sink” into the ocean, allowing some of the force to escape, was the only reason they did not end up with anything like

an ice age brought on by an asteroid strike.

“The Hammer Throw 001...fell???”

The rising curtain of dust was swept away by the storm. Myonri reported on what she saw in a daze.

“It was...a crane. ...Did the crane on a building rooftop swing around and... catch on the main rotor?”

“It didn’t swing the arm around,” corrected Wraith while seawater swelled up from below.

An old guerilla tactic against helicopters and tiltrotors was to throw a wire or net over them from the top of a building. But...

“The crane rotated vertically. Some kind of explosive blasted it at the base to tangle the thick wire in the rotor. It didn’t matter that the spherical main body can withstand a nuke.”

An explosive.

A flesh-and-blood soldier had attacked one of the Objects which were synonymous with war.

The 50-meter and 20,000-ton spherical main body had lost its balance and fallen at one corner of the city. It seemed to be near the broadcast station. The exact level of damage was unclear while on the ground like this.

“Could it be...?”

However.

That had to be Heivia’s greatest hope.

So the delinquent soldier could not help but say it aloud.

“Quen-...”

“No.”

A voice bluntly cut him off.

It came from Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

She could not look him in the eye as she forced out the words.

“I’m sorry, but that simply isn’t possible.”

Part 12

Sigma 3, Robinson King-Cole, was just as stunned as the incredible shaking reached him.

“What happened...?”

He doubted the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, or a third group disguised as them could have done this.

Nevertheless, the Second Generation Ix Chel being resupplied at the Olympia Dome had indeed been brought down. It had happened so suddenly that he felt like he was analyzing movement in a video game one frame at a time.

“OD Control! What the hell happened!?”

He already half-suspected that he would receive no response.

At the same time, a hopeless chill ran down his spine. What possibilities could he think of? When he laid out the cards, he could not rid himself of this unease. After all, their mission had been to transport something dangerous.

And that “something” had not been the flying Object called Ix Chel. As extraordinary as it was, that colossal weapon had already belonged to Robinson’s maintenance battalion, so it would not be counted as an external “package”.

But in a way, Ix Chel was nothing compared to the true “package”.

Had it really taken advantage of this confusion...?

“Nee hee hee hee.”

He heard a voice.

A lovely but wicked girl’s voice sounded from directly behind Sigma 3. And the next thing he knew, all other voices had vanished. And he heard no noises at all from the comrades he had been fighting alongside for so long.

“Did you not even notice? You didn’t, did you? Well, that doesn’t really matter. Thanks for your work, though. Oh, this is my destination. And it’s also the end of the line for you. You’ve been waging war day in and day out for so long you have to be familiar with the concept of ‘acceptable losses’, right? If you were tasked with looking after me without being informed...well, just remember that concept.”

He did not even have time to turn around.

But the scene he did not want to see was reflected in the show window in front of him.

It was a red and black hell.

And one violent and brutal visual overpowered even the deaths of his allies.

A young girl with long, long blonde twintails wore an Object Elite’s blade, bullet, explosion, and environment resistant special suit which revealed even the slightest contour of her slender body.

She was not the grim reaper that brought death and demise according to predetermined rules, like one’s natural lifespan.

She was an incarnation of destruction on a much higher dimension who destroyed the world on a whim.

...He should have noticed.

Whether they were the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance, the intruders alone could not have caused so much damage. He had assumed the Faith Organization soldiers’ rampage was to blame, but that was not it. It was neither the enemy nor his allies. A third party had used the confusion to remove heads and pierce hearts.

“I followed *his* example and learned how to use bombs to destroy Objects, but...hmm, what does this mean? I don’t see any sign of him... Well, I just need to search a little longer.”

This was not war.

It was crime, yet it had done greater harm than an official war.

This was the dangerous thing that Robinson King-Cole’s maintenance

battalion had been transporting.

“Don’t worry about the Manhattan and all that annoying stuff. I, Skuld Silent-Third, will take care of it, so you all can rest in peace. By byyye☆”

Between the Lines 1

The continuous IV drip has been ended.

Saint Skuld Silent-Third is active once more.

The Saint has a glowing record as the primary Pilot Elite of the Faith Organization's Second Generation Norn, but she is also known by the Faith Organization to be the greatest war criminal. She generally chooses her victims carefully within the bases which are seen as small cities, but that is not always the case.

- Former Oceanian Dictatorship: Annihilation of a pro-government village.
- Cape of Good Hope District: Burning of a mercenary camp.
- Alaska District: The mysterious deaths of a foreign press group.
- Malacca District: The sinking of a cargo ship.
- And the infamous Madagascar Report. Please reference that report so it need not be repeated here.

Her primary killing method is strangulation using her own hands, but she is extremely fickle and changes a lot from moment to moment. In the Madagascar District, there was evidence she used old-fashioned torture equipment. These are the crimes of an individual, but if they are slow to be discovered or dealt with, she has the skill to destroy a mid-level guerilla base and construct a mountain of corpses on her own. She intentionally includes shifts and swings of analog emotion in her digital mission operations, so her actions are incredibly hard to simulate and existing troop management rules do not apply. Once she has been released into the wild, do not focus too much on any fixed idea and be

extremely careful in how she is handled.

It is dangerous to assume you are safe just because you are the one with a gun.

What she says and her carefree changes of expression cannot be relied on. The Saint is an extremely intelligent war criminal, so she can use various psychological tests and counseling methods to her advantage to win one's trust.

Be extremely cautious of the unique "charisma of death" found in many serial killers. She generally prefers acting alone, but she has something that destroys the morals of those around her. If you begin to think that you alone can communicate with her, you are in an especially dangerous situation. Make sure you have regular meetings with your supervising officer to receive an objective, third-party view of your mental state.

The Saint is a genuine serial killer, so she shows some fixations that normal people find hard to understand.

Currently, she appears obsessed with a specific individual named Quenser Barbotage. For information on him, view the records from the Madagascar District, specifically concerning the destruction of the Norn.

Most likely, it is simply not possible to fully control Saint Skuld Silent-Third. If you are giving her freedom as part of your operation, you must build in a high level of acceptable losses for enemy, ally, and civilian alike. Also, it is more effective to lure her with bait than to give her orders. Gathering information on the aforementioned Quenser Barbotage and using that name to distract her may be one possible method.

Offered to Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker.

May a peaceful holy age arrive to this sinful and impure world.

Chapter 2: Parasite Kill >> Battle for Liberation Within Manhattan

Part 1

Bloodrics Capistrano chose the “beaten up” option.

“Pant, pant, pant!!”

“...G-gbweh. Wait, it would really help your Onii-chan if you ended this attack...”

Frolaytia Capistrano gasped for breath while holding her brother’s bowtie in her left hand. Her dominant hand was of course clenched in a fist.

They were in a military port of the Amazon District where the Legitimacy Kingdom held a lot of sway.

They were a few hours away from the Central American ocean. They had taken a submarine which clearly had too much speed and stealth for civilian ownership. Its distress signal had been picked up and the few survivors, including Frolaytia, had set foot on dry land once more.

After arguing with her blood relative in a guest room for noble visitors, the busty silver-haired 18-year-old clicked her tongue and let go of the trash. She then spoke to the laptop sitting on the heavy work desk.

“Princess. Things have calmed down here for the time being. You’ve gathered enough information, so return to base before you go too far and get burned.”

“But...”

“...I know what you’re trying to say, but if we waste our trump card here, we really will lose all means of rescuing our people from the Bermuda Triangle.”

Needless to say, Frolaytia and the others had not been sitting around doing nothing.

The Princess’s Baby Magnum was a multi-role First Generation that could race along the ocean at more than 500km/h and swap between multiple different main cannon types: low-stability plasma cannons, railguns, coilguns, laser beams, rapid-fire beam cannons, *etc.* Even if it could not immediately supply a decisive blow, it was the perfect Object for directly engaging the enemy force to get a sense for what it could do.

And what had they learned after firing various types of cannons from a distance with no expectation of a hit?

“Electronic simulation division.”

“We only have rough estimates, but we have finished analyzing the footage.”

Frolaytia spoke to a different channel and received an immediate response from one of the experts who continued working with what equipment had survived. She was clearly exhausted, but there was no dissatisfaction in her voice. Everyone knew it was only coincidence that they had been protected. If the luck of the draw had placed them in the other category, they would have been devoured by the Information Alliance.

“To start with, the Manhattan really does have extraordinary firepower. That electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon is essentially detonating a JPlevelMHD reactor with each shot. By firing that main cannon in every direction like the face of a clock, it could entirely surround itself with a wall of plasma like some kind of fortress city.”

“That’s a lot like an old-fashioned ABM system...or a defensive theory using nuclear mines.”

Frolaytia stuffed unique-smelling shredded tobacco into her long and narrow *kiseru* as she spoke.

Laser beams were light, so they could be bent if high temperatures altered the refractive index. Plasma and rapid-fire beams were weak to

electromagnetism. Railguns and coilguns used metal shells, so their trajectory could be bent using expanding air or explosive blasts.

Simply put, an absolute defense was possible if you forced it through with enough firepower.

However, it was a strategy only possible for the Manhattan and its hundreds or possibly thousands of reactors.

“But it didn’t do that, did it? It only used the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon the very first time.”

“Yes. And the theory of bending a laser was also used by the Nitrogen Mirage. It still used ultra-high temperatures – albeit not as high – but it achieved that by firing low-stability plasma fireballs around the battlefield and then firing the laser beam or railgun. It was a lot like a rollercoaster. It ignores all existing artillery theories.”

But when the Manhattan had responded to the Princess’s “test firing”, it had not filled the area with firepower; it had returned fire with pinpoint sharpshooting. It had shot down each of the Baby Magnums various shells and lasers like a venomous snake targeting mice or frogs.

The metal shells had been fried with electron beams or laser beams.

The optical weapons had been reflected and neutralized by metal shells.

“So far, it has only intercepted our attacks, but if it goes on the attack itself, the Baby Magnum will not last five minutes,” said the electronic simulation division.

“Ah, you idiot!!”

Frolaytia tried to stop her, but it was too late.

The Princess was already childishy pouting her lips on the screen.

“I don’t mind. Because it’s true. Hehh, hohh, hmm.”

“Listen, everyone can get along when things are going well. The true value of teamwork is when things are going badly. Everyone needs to keep that in mind!!”

“Also,” continued the electronic simulation division. “Including Manhattan’s visitors, there should be more than 10 million civilians onboard. If they are used as hostages, any direct attack will be a target of international criticism.”

“Have you not even noticed the trouble you’ve caused us, you geek!?”

Frolaytia shouted, but the Princess still looked suspicious. She brushed back the short blonde hair plastered to her forehead with sweat, unzipped her special suit, and sprayed a coolant directly on her flushed soft skin. Everyone, including the analyst, was female, so she did not need to restrain herself.

The fact that arrogant Frolaytia had to act as a cushion for her showed just how chaotic the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s situation was.

(Heivia can wait until later, but we really need Quenser back immediately!!)

Frolaytia placed a hand on her forehead while having that very rude thought.

And as stated, they could not use an Object’s firepower to fry 10 million civilians, even if they belonged to an enemy nation. Thus, the Baby Magnum had made sure its main cannons would not hit during its reconnaissance mission.

...Of course, that was also because moving too close before understanding their enemy’s specs was likely to result in the Baby Magnum being turned to ashes by a variety of super weapons, including the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon.

The Manhattan had easily fired a deadly blast from New York to New Caribbean Island – from North America to Central America.

The Princess used her small hand to fan air into her opened special suit and made a suggestion while sounding dazed from the heat.

“Since it intercepts attacks that are not actually going to hit, could we fire randomly but rapidly so it uses up all its ammo?”

“It’s not a bad idea, but remember how large the Manhattan is. Even if it’s forced into back-to-back battles without resupplying, we’ll dry up first.”

What could they do?

How could they supply an effective blow to that monster?

(If a direct attack won't work, I guess we'll have to try some kind of trick. Like sending a small group right up to that giant thing...)

Frolaytia narrowed her eyes with a quiet look on her face, but then slowly shook her head.

Had she been infected by those idiots' way of thinking?

The Princess breathed a heated sigh and spoke with a blank look in her eyes.

"I want to see Quenser and the others soon."

(Agreed. This is hard work without anyone to shove the most annoying parts onto.)

Frolaytia kept that part to herself and then spoke up.

"Analyst, the Martini Series holds the AI network's reins, so why do you think they authorized this?"

"That is unknown, including just how many of them have malfunctioned. We simply have too little information to say. But assuming they are not wishing for their own destruction, I can't imagine why they would send the Manhattan to the front line on its own..."

"..."

"Capulet is an AI network. If it sees no special meaning in the loss of individual physical devices, then it might view even the Manhattan as a disposable game piece."

"If the algorithm was that digitally destructive, I doubt the Information Alliance would have prospered as much as it has. At the very least, it would not be so accepting of the highly-wasteful lifestyles of humans."

If not all that many Martinis had actually lost control, it would explain why Manhattan itself had taken action all of a sudden. But they had no real evidence and the situation was fluid. And if the other Martinis were affected in a rapid chain reaction, it would hardly matter.

"Any sign of our people who disappeared at sea?"

"None at all. Our embassies and consulates have received no notification that

they were taken prisoner. ...We cannot even say whether they are still alive or not.”

“It’s too late to go check the Information Alliance maintenance fleet that was nearly obliterated by their own side. I wish we had at least sent out a spy plane to keep an eye on it, but it’s simply too late. Thanks to a certain moron!!”

Bloodrics responded to Frolaytia’s shout by raising both hands without getting up off the floor.

“Tia-chan, you know that would not have been realistic either way, don’t you?” said the pummeled brother. “Even if you had accomplished something then, they would have gotten serious and vaporized New Caribbean Island.”

An alarmed cry came from the screen.

Bloodrics could not see the laptop screen from his position, but the Princess must not have known that. As soon as she heard a male voice, she blushed and quickly held the front of her special suit closed with her small hands.

Frolaytia ignored that and spoke coldly to her blood-related brother.

“So what?”

“If no one reports on it, no one would know any of your people were left with the Information Alliance maintenance fleet. Then there would be zero hope of rescue for them.”

“ ... ”

The brother’s point made the sister grimace so hard she nearly bit off the end of the long, narrow *kiseru* in her mouth. He was right, but she did not want to accept it. Anyone could tell just by looking at her.

There was nothing they could do.

But that did not mean they had no thoughts on the matter.

They knew their comrades were clinging to life on a deadly battlefield across the ocean where they could not even ask for help, but they could not reach out a hand. They wished they could trade places. That was not just a nice thing to say after seeing some tragedy on TV. They all meant it. Otherwise, they would not have forced their exhausted bodies to keep moving and continued

gathering information without any sleep or complaint. The Pilot Elite, the base commander, the maintenance soldiers, and the analysts were all in agreement on that.

Bloodrics Capistrano understood that.

And that was why he had done more than *just* flee.

“I provided a starting point for you. How is he doing?”

“Rigas Blackpassion was one of the people on that Capitalist Corporations submarine.”

“But you saw that report that he said something interesting, didn’t you?” Bloodrics got up from the floor. “The Ragnarok Script. It seems to be a toy capable of interfering with the Martini Series that forms the core of the Information Alliance. Although we don’t know if they inject something of pure data into their heads or stimulate their senses using pheromones, ultrasound, flashing lights, or whatever else. That means solving this might require more than simply attacking the Information Alliance. This might sound somewhat dirty, but this Ragnarok Script might be an opportunity for us. ...If an external attack looks hopeless, causing them to crumble from within might create enough of a ‘crack’ to rescue your people stranded in that deadly ocean.”

“ ...”

Frolaytia clicked her tongue again and sent a fist into the center of Bloodrics face for getting carried away.

Without even a glance toward her collapsed brother, the sister left the guest room with her laptop full of classified information. She walked to the interrogation room with some large men from base security. There, she found an upper middle-aged man bound by leather belts to something like a dentist’s chair.

The long-haired, gloomy, and timid interrogator girl whispered to Frolaytia. Her face was hidden by her bangs, an eyepatch, a mask, and some headphones, so her nickname when she was younger may have been Kuchisake Onna.

“H-he seems to have lost a lot of blood when Sir Bloodrics severed his hand with a katana, so I need to stabilize his blood pressure first. We should be able

to administer the drug after that, so, um..."

"Rigas Blackpassion," cut in Frolaytia. "The Ragnarok Script. I want to know what that means. Did you really procure it yourself? I doubt a small fry like you is pulling all the strings. What is hidden behind the scenes?"

The Capitalist Corporations man raised his limply-hanging head.

"I don't expect the war treaties to apply in this sealed room...but my life still has value. Look at my arm. Ha ha. Push me too hard and I'll die before you can get any information out of me. Treat me with care or you will be wasting your time."

"Is that so?"

There was nothing more than that.

Frolaytia must not have been expecting anything from the beginning because she casually glanced over at the interrogator who had desperately hidden her face.

"The plan was to loosen his lips by ridding him of his mental willpower with a drug, right?"

"Y-yes, um, we will be using an animal anesthetic. It's the same idea as someone talking more readily when they're sleep-deprived or intoxicated. But before any of that, we have to give him a blood transfusion to stabilize his blood pressure..."

"No, that gives us another option. Hold this a moment."

"?"

Frolaytia pushed her laptop into the interrogator's arms, shocking the flat-chested girl into silence.

And with a dry gunshot, a dark red hole opened in Rigas's neck.

"Ah...bah?"

There was a blank in his memories.

As Rigas looked over his sweaty body, he tasted a rusty flavor spreading

through the back of his throat, saw dark, dried blood on his uniform, and felt the pain receding. He must have been given some kind of anesthetic.

The Capitalist Corporations officer blinked in confusion at the unnatural passage of time and Frolaytia spat some disinterested words his way.

“Your heart stopped for about 1 minute 45 seconds. From the shock of blood loss. You should be thankful Luce was skillful enough to revive you.”

His breathing was not functioning properly.

He heard a whistling sound with each breath.

“Y-you’re kidd-...”

Another bang.

“35 seconds.”

“Wait, are you saying you-...”

“1 minute 2 seconds.”

“Abbeh. Gurgle gurgle...”

“Oh, that was a close one. You were out for 2 minutes and 30 seconds.”

A yes or no answer changed nothing. To transform him into a human device that would spit out whatever they wanted to know, his mind had to be thoroughly torn down first. The violence would continue until Rigas Blackpassion no longer said anything unnecessary.

Each time his consciousness cut out and returned, the amount of boxy medical equipment surrounding the dentist-like chair had increased. At this point, the electronics probably weighed more than Rigas himself.

For some reason, the interrogator girl (who was now soaked with blood) was gagging and crying behind her eyepatch and mask more than the Capitalist Corporations officer himself.

The look in Frolaytia’s eyes had not changed. The handgun drawn from her hip was still aimed directly at him.

“Not even an expert can completely control the revival. So it might not work next time.”

“...You...what about the war treaties...the fundamental articles on treatment of prisoners...?”

He was killed twice more.

Rigas was now covered in tubes. He had essentially been turned into a living mummy and was nearly encased in the blocks of medical equipment. And Frolaytia’s eyes were even colder than the machinery.

“Blood loss intoxication. That’s the excuse used by perverts with an abnormal fetish for drinking blood or having their own blood drunk. It’s also theorized to explain why a police officer can dramatically stand back up after being shot in the gut. If all we need to do is adjust your body’s internal state to loosen your lips, we don’t need to inject a drug. We only need to cause enough blood loss to leave you woozy. Of course, take too much and you’ll die before telling us anything, so it isn’t exactly favored by experts. And sure enough, you’re approaching death pretty quickly now.”

They were neither killing him nor not killing him.

Her casual tone led the Capitalist Corporations officer to move his tense vocal cords and force out the words.

“Y-you’re insane...”

“Don’t even try it, you fool. I’m the piece of shit that retreated to this safe base while ignoring so many of my people who needed help. And yet you think *your* life should be guaranteed when you’re the one that messed with the Information Alliance and set up some kind of conspiracy? Just how convenient a world do you think you live in!?”

He could no longer speak.

While Rigas gasped as he struggled to breath, Frolaytia Capistrano pressed her handgun muzzle to the center of his forehead and roared at him while the heat sizzled on his skin.

“I will do whatever it takes to get the information I need to rescue those idiots. The Ragnarok Script. Either tell me everything you know or you can continue playing ding dong dash at the pearly gates!! Now, what will you do, you piece of shit!!!?????”

Part 2

“Simply put, it was practice.”

The tall Asian beauty named Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks spoke on the cruiser’s bridge.

Unlike the past, modern ship’s bridges were not all that important. Ship and weapons control were generally done in the windowless combat command center on a lower level, so this bridge was mostly just for show. In an intense battle, the captain on down would have to withdraw from this central point. That seemed like a case of mismatched priorities, but it had gained a new value.

Yes.

It was the perfect place for the privileged class to clear everyone else away for a private conversation.

Although it did require some caution for female officers in skirts because the reinforced glass window extended all the way to the floor just like a broadcast tower’s viewing deck.

“To be honest, the Olympia Dome’s broadcast facility was not all that high a priority. It was better off destroyed, but we could have dealt with the issue even if it was not. Same with forcing the Legitimacy Kingdom to pay reparations. That must have left quite a few bodies behind, but it seems the Faith Organization was up to no good as well. What really mattered was proving the method as effective. ...That is, a method of directly accessing the moving Manhattan 000, gathering information, and sabotaging it if necessary.”

“ ...”

Wraith, another Martini Series, maintained a troubled expression.

Taratua remained seated in her fancy chair and casually clapped her hands twice at her fellow Martini who had safely returned from the Olympia Dome.

“As a giant artificial floating island, the Olympia Dome has many similarities to the world’s largest Object. To be honest, the Olympia Dome is the more difficult of the two when looking only at the infiltration phase. After all, our maintenance fleet and the Manhattan 000 are both from the Information Alliance. If we set a damaged ship adrift and send out a distress signal, the Martini holding the Manhattan 000’s reins will follow the rulebook and approve a rescue even as she argues with the AI network. Simply put, we can get onboard using the exact same method.”

“But how many Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers are left? Thanks to your meaningless harassment, they were driven nearly to disaster and most of them were slaughtered by that flying Object.”

“Oh, is that why you’re so irritable?” Taratua did not seem to care. “Disposable personnel are only valuable when you dispose of them. Can you win a war if you’re too afraid to fire a single bullet? We just have to gather spare personnel from elsewhere. Any new soldiers can be provided the necessary information through training. They work and we profit. Simple, right?”

“Is what you’re doing even war?”

“Oh, it’s war. A war by me and for me. In that sense, I may have wronged you, Wraith. They’re only disposable, but they do have experience packed in their heads. So I promised them your head as a reward for a successful mission.”

“...”

“Given how much the blood had rushed to their heads, I imagine they’ll kill you before they can even think up a cleverer but more perverted plan. Well, just accept it as your fate. I will increase the value of the Martini Series, so you can be part of the foundation.”

Wraith sighed.

“Let’s discuss a hypothetical.”

“Hold on, do you think this is a chat between friends or something? Romantic advice is simply outside my area of expertise.”

“...Let’s say there is a method of completely destroying the Martini Series

from without, using the same kind of active self-denial as throwing out everything you own to get a new start on life. Would someone as universally capable and foolish as you be able to forgive your fellow Martinis who went insane?”

“Is that what this is about?” Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks gave a snort of laughter while elegantly crossing her legs. “It would be one thing if you were born with it, but when it’s something done to you afterwards, then you should have been able to prevent it or stop it. No attack or defense is perfect if it is made by human hands. That is why the Martini Series was created to make up for the AI network’s flaws. We’re supposed to play house with Capulet which may not even have a center anymore.”

“Your point?”

“Active self-denial? If someone takes advantage of a vulnerability, the responsibility lies with the person who knew of it but didn’t put together a countermeasure.”

“I see,” muttered Wraith while squirming a bit.

Now, did Taratua notice that the medals on her chest reflected the sunlight to inconspicuously send a signal somewhere?

A moment later, a spider web of cracks ran through the thick bulletproof glass on the floor of the bridge.

“Oh...?”

There was a surprised expression there.

The leather chair’s stuffing scattered everywhere. Taratua’s butt slid forward in that luxurious chair. She tried to hold onto the armrests, but her entire body had gone limp. Her hips fell from the chair and she collapsed to the floor.

Had the wet sensation finally caught up to her by then?

Fresh blood was splattered around like someone had rubbed red paint around with a mop. Needless to say, it drew out the path Taratua had taken as she rolled along the floor.

And lastly...



There was a dark red hole in the tall Asian beauty's stomach.

"Ah...bh."

"If someone takes advantage of a vulnerability, the responsibility lies with the person who knew of it but didn't put together a countermeasure? You are awful through and through, but it doesn't really matter if you were broken or if you were always that way."

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray's expression had not changed.

"Who do you think did this?"

She slowly leaned forward to bring her face in close, but she showed no sign of stopping the hemorrhaging blood or providing any other first aid to her fellow Martini.

"You're the kind of asshole who hides information on the Hammer Throw 001 for no other reason than to be cruel. You probably can't even keep track of how many people hold a grudge against you. If you were mediocre enough to be convinced, I would not have had to rely on this."

"...— — —"

"Yes, yes. No need to worry. None of our people will be blamed. They made sure to bring back some Faith Organization guns and ammunition as souvenirs. Shoot you with those and, well, all the documents will say you were shot by an enemy soldier in the normal course of the war. War is not treated as a crime. Although this might change some rules so we can't hold private conversations on the bridge any longer. The adults will be sad to lose another valuable smoking area. Personally, I'm not too fond of the combat command center and its thick walls. It feels too oppressive."

Nothing dramatic happened.

Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks could not close her wide-open eyelids and she simply stopped moving like her battery had run dry.

Humans were selfish creatures. She did not inspire the kind of emotion that Piranirie had.

Wraith held a hand to her ear and spoke into her earpiece.

“She is dead. I will send her body to the military doctor and have it proven that the wound came from a shot fired from 400 meters. And that it was done by the Faith Organization bullet embedded in the wall.”

“Oh, is that so? Thanks for actually choosing to kill her. I don’t think I could have handled it if you had tried to bring Taratua into this. But what else would I expect from one of the great Martinis? No one’s better at sending people to their death.”

“...”

“Honestly, this is the last time I do anything as annoying as a sniper job from a one-man submersible rocking in the waves. Now you need to take command. You can do that as a Martini, right?”

“Hold on. That’s much easier said than done. It’s not just an issue of rank. You need to consider affiliation and the command structure as well. You are aware how many hurdles I have to clear here, aren’t you?”

“I don’t care, Madam Lieutenant Colonel. The only reason I didn’t shoot you first is because you’re easier to control and thus more valuable than Taratua. Well, there was also all the people who died because she hid the information about the Hammer Throw 001. After we settle this Manhattan issue, you need to modify the records so they don’t list us as dead. That’s the only way we can return to our normal lives.”

“Understood.”

“Are you sure?”

This was not an icy voice.

Heivia’s voice was somehow mechanical. That was proof that he had passed the temporary surge of emotion and his drive for revenge had settled in as a normal thing. With the exception of a certain individual, no pain or death he witnessed would shake his heart now.

Wraith had seen plenty of people like that on the battlefield.

As a Martini, she had maintained order within the Information Alliance military by managing losing armies and occasionally eliminating berserk units or

indirectly executing war criminals by sending them to certain death.

“Your life is a limited-time-only deal that lasts as long as you’re useful to us. Once you’re useless, you will meet the same fate as Taratua. You can give me an upturned look with tears in your eyes and you can place your hands on the wall and stick your ass out toward me, but it won’t change a thing. I’m having a hard time finding reasons not shoot you right in your insane head. So work hard for the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

The cold and mechanical transmission ended.

Wraith was all alone for the moment.

No, it was possible no one had ever filled the gap left by that one boy. Not even the young man who was always by her side. Especially when she knew how angry it would make her if someone casually offered to fill that gap.

Part 3

“Captain Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks was killed in a cowardly and calculated surprise attack by a Faith Organization remnant. I will take command for the remainder of the operation. I am sure some of you will not like having me go over your heads, but I would like you to leave this to me as I am an expert at recovering from failure in combat.”

Inside the tilted supply ship, Wraith explained that with her aide by her side.

The operation was already underway.

“I am having a retaliation list put together based on who could have made that sniper shot given the conditions, but that is being handled by a different team. Because we have our own timetable. We will show all standard condolences and respect to Taratua by continuing with her suggestion. We will disguise one of ‘our’ maintenance fleet’s ships as a wreck and place it along the Manhattan 000’s predicted path. We will have it pick up the crew and bring them directly onboard.”

“...So it’s essentially the same as with the Olympia Dome. The problem is it’s still hard to say whether that was a success or a failure.”

Heivia sounded fed up with the whole idea.

The fox saw that look on the tanuki’s face and nodded.

“The Manhattan 000 has extraordinary size and power and it is currently the world’s largest Object, but it cannot attack us if we are right up on it. Because it can’t fire on itself. Boarding it will be the first obstacle.”

After all, a normal(?) Object was about 50 meters, while just the portion of the Manhattan visible above water was more than 20,000 meters. It also had more than one reactor and the total number was unknown. The fact that its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon had obliterated Heivia’s unit in

the blink of an eye from North America to Central America made it clear that its range and power were both far beyond the norm. Any standard Object that challenged it would be vaporized before it even arrived within firing range.

Any explanation would just sound like someone bragging about its abilities.

Did it not have even the slightest weakness or flaw?

“Is our objective to destroy it?”

“If necessary.” Wraith readily agreed even though she too was from the Information Alliance. “But while the Manhattan 000’s specs are on another level entirely, it still has more than 10 million normal residents on its surface. We cannot make a general attack from the outside.”

“What has even happened to them?”

That alone was an honest question. Taratua had said Manhattan itself was traveling south at 388 knots, which was around 700km/h. If that was true, it would be like clinging to the wing of a passenger plane.

But Wraith only shook her head.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t seem there has been any major damage.”

“??? Were they all evacuated to the subway stations or something?”

“No, not that.” The blonde girl answered Myonri’s question while her hand wandered through empty air as if in search of a pen to twirl. “It seems they’re artificially manipulating the air currents to protect the Manhattan surface from the violent winds.”

“Wait, what? Manipulating the air currents???”

“It makes sense in theory. Even your average factory uses air curtains. By blowing an artificial wind vertically, you can keep out the dust and dirt that would otherwise get in horizontally. By scaling that up by a lot, they’re using the wind blown up from below to divert the fierce headwind hitting them from the front. It forms a dome.”

“That’s simple enough to say, but we’re talking about the same winds a passenger plane would experience!”

“So what? Just how much of your ordinary, everyday common sense do you think applies to the Manhattan 000? Not even I know how many JPlevelMHD reactors it has.”

Just how forceful could it be?

But that was exactly how Objects had ended the age of stealth bombers and nuclear weapons.

“As long as they can solve the air current problem, the rest is easy. 700km/h might sound scary, but it’s really the same as riding a linear motor train or a passenger plane. It should be a comfortable ride as long as it doesn’t make any of the sharp footwork seen in Object combat.”

But once you were onboard, you could not get off.

And no one could predict what the Martinis or Manhattan would do. There was no guarantee the 20,000m mass wouldn’t suddenly perform footwork that exceeded a fighter craft’s movements.

“...What’s going on there?”

“Who knows. We are intercepting some of the EM signals as a part of analyzing the Object, but it seems the people’s usual smartphone-dependent lifestyle is continuing. They’re still posting on social media and video sites without a care in the world.”

Myonri blinked at that.

“Um, they’re not connected to the outside internet, are they?”

“You can analyze someone’s conversational patterns if you can see their social media friends list and message log. They’re probably receiving automated responses disguised as their online friends’ accounts. The Martini in charge of New York may be doing her best to deny reality as a part of her active self-denial. Thanks to that, the logical and thoughtless Capulet AI Network is in top form today. Everyone in New York probably thinks they’re internet heroes. Their desire for approval is probably being satisfied more than ever before.”

Heivia found it hard to decide whether or not that just meant their senses had been dulled by peace.

Legitimacy Kingdom military textbooks told the story of a man who cooked instant ramen even as his house burned down around him. When humans were faced with a situation too difficult to accept, a defense instinct would apparently kick in and they would continue their normal daily routine to preserve their mental balance. That way they could tell themselves they were still living their normal life and had yet to stray beyond it.

Wraith brought a hand to her slender chin.

“Our objective is to discover the reason why the Manhattan 000 is on its way here. From the look of things, I doubt we can hope for the Pilot Elite to go on strike. As I said before, the ultimate decision is up to the Capulet AI Network that supports the Manhattan 000 and the Martini who holds its reins. The idea that it is here to settle the mess around New Caribbean Island concerning the Nitrogen Mirage and Katarina Martini is no more than speculation, so we don’t know the actual reason. If that girl is acting in the overall interest of the Information Alliance, I will protect her. If she is ignoring an error in Capulet and has steered in the direction of annihilating the human race, then I must destroy and stop the Manhattan 000 that acts as her eyes and ears and her arms and legs.”

“Is that the Information Alliance’s overall opinion?” asked Heivia. “If not, this will count as treason and you’ll be reduced to a slave.”

“It’s an issue of the human heart. I was ‘created’ in the hopes that I would have the humanity to stop a rampaging machine when the adults alone could not make the appropriate decision. So that is what I will do.” The Martini Series girl did not bat an eye. “Also, I will share the details on Melly Martini Extradry who was in charge of New York security. All contact with her has been lost and there has been no report of her death. The very fact that she has intentionally failed to report to the military is an irregularity. It is possible she has been broken by abuse of active self-denial just like Piranirie. As you experienced with Piranirie, a broken Martini is more dangerous than a machine. The Elite may have been affected as well.”

Wraith closed her mouth for a moment there.

Before death, Piranirie had mentioned some external factor that could drive

the Martini Series mad. She had assumed the culprit was Katarina, the engineer asking for asylum, but she had been wrong. And she had said an enemy force was the most likely suspect as they would gain the most from doing that to the Martini Series who preserved order in the Information Alliance.

Was the true enemy in the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Capitalist Corporations, or the Faith Organization?

Myonri must have been quick to adapt to new environments because she raised her hand before speaking to an enemy commander.

“U-umm, then, uh, how do we from the Legitimacy Kingdom benefit from looking into the secrets of the Martini Series and Manhattan?”

“To be blunt, you don’t.”

Wraith Martini Vermouthsray sounded indifferent.

But she may have been better than Taratua since she did not hide the truth and deceive them.

“But if you fake your deaths during the intense fighting with the Manhattan 000, you will have a chance to escape the control of Capulet which manages the entire Information Alliance.”

“You have to be joking. You’re the commanding officer here. Aren’t we free once you sign the right document?”

“I am not Piranirie or Taratua. Without their rule of fear, the many people below me will grow suspicious and might shoot you in the back if you attempt to leave with a smile.” Wraith quietly sighed. “With how big the Manhattan 000 is, a single shot will reduce you to ashes, preventing anyone from identifying your corpse. And a naval facility should have plenty of ways to escape in an emergency. More than just small boats and submersibles, I wouldn’t be surprised to learn it has an entire giant submarine. ...All I want are the results. When you see a chance, then run off on your own.”

“What about the documents the Information Alliance rewrote!? I was a noble heir back home, but they’ll treat me like a ghost now!! I don’t want to get home only to be turned away as a lookalike and forced to live in a cardboard box!!”

“Your military will have your DNA data on file. Run to a base or embassy with a hair or tissue full of squid-smelling filth and have them check the genetic information. You can tell them the report of your death was just more of the Information Alliance’s usual harassment.”

“...You have got to be kidding. We’re not talking about a loan shark’s 5-second smartphone eligibility check. That’s not exactly a guarantee.”

“Then this knowledgeable beauty will write up some memoirs on a website anyone can access. If I mention the harassment operation, you won’t have anything to worry about.”

It was a very Information Alliance kind of thing to write up fake memoirs as a way of getting out the truth.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray lightly clapped her hands to gather attention.

“We all have our own goals here, but right now we need to clear the first hurdle. Then we can use the situation to our advantage. The strategy itself is simple. Taratua said the Olympia Dome incident was practice, so we just have to do that again.”

“That sounds great. Very reassuring.”

Heivia breathed a heavy sigh.

And then he said it.

“The problem is that the damn Manhattan saw right through our trick, fired a giant blast our way, and tore a huge chunk out of our ship, so now we can see the ocean right there. Goddammit!!”

A rapid-fire beam had punched through the side of the ship, so the entire thing looked like a half-circle arch. Even if its height was restricted to keep the center of gravity low, it was still more than 9 meters. The steel supply ship just ended all of a sudden and there was the ocean directly below. The exposed cabins and corridors were visible in the other end of the cross section a few dozen meters away.

The artificial storm had passed, so it was sunny.

They were afraid to remain on the flimsy deck. The sea shining in the light of

the blue sky and sun had never looked so sinister before.

A single attack from Manhattan had transformed a nearly 80m steel ship into an arch, but it must have been more of a game for it. It was like an exterminator poking at the beehive with the insecticide nozzle to see if it was still full of pests or if it was empty.

It had been a cannon, but only the smallest of the small.

If it had used its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon, all metal would have been melted over an area of several dozen kilometers.

“I-I’m actually surprised,” said Myonri. “Information Alliance ships can take this much damage without sinking!?”

“Well, the ballast tanks are functioning as floats and the bulkheads and watertight doors were shut. Plus, a supply ship will have more tanks than usual. It’s basically filled with small balloons like the packaging material used to protect online store shipments.”

“She meant that as a rhetorical question, you overly serious idiot!! More importantly, what do we do? The Manhattan knows we’re here. Lightning is about to strike on the level of your parents finding out you were browsing porn on the tablet you borrowed from them!!”

According to Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks, the Manhattan was supposed to arrive near New Caribbean Island 4 or 5 hours after leaving New York. They could not tell from the edge of the arch, but they were already sharing the ocean with it.

There was a bright beam of light.

But it was not the Manhattan.

“What idiot did that!? What bastard just poked the hornet’s nest without even asking permission!?”

“Those are...probably Faith Organization Second Generations. Challenging that thing with only 5 Objects is suicidal, but maybe they were ordered to gather information no matter what.”

Wraith’s judgment was proof enough that this had surpassed the assumptions

of the clean wars.

They did not have time to figure out the individual traits of the Objects. Cannons were fired one after another. Any one of those Faith Organization elites would have been able to easily defeat Heivia's group in a proper fight, but they were almost immediately blown away like a sugar sculpture placed too close to a heater.

"It...The Manhattan took *some* damage from that, didn't it!?"

"Probably not," said Wraith. "With that much firepower, it can divert anything from plasma to lasers. And have you not noticed what the weather is like?"

"It's bright and sunny, but what does that have to do with-...ah."

"So even a fool like you has finally caught on. A single shot from its prized electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon will stir up the atmosphere to the point of causing rapid pressure changes that produce a major storm, but there's no sign of that. That means it was holding back. The Manhattan 000 is intentionally keeping its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon in reserve."

Needless to say, it was not holding back for the Faith Organization's sake.

Wraith's opinion was rational.

"A storm would expose the people of Manhattan to lightning strikes. That's the only concern it has. If any of the Faith Organization cannons could have scored a direct hit and done serious damage to the people, it probably would have ended the battle even sooner using its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon. It showed no hint of that."

It had been too easy.

The last of the five Objects was unemotionally blown away.

"That's awful. The battle is already over. That wasn't even enough time to cook some instant noodles."

Heivia had gone pale as he fiddled with his assault rifle and shoulder-fired missile launcher at the edge of the arch, so Wraith continued in exasperation.

"Since you might actually be that stupid, I guess I'll ask: You don't think you

can sink the Manhattan 000 with those, do you?”

“It’s already learned of our plan!! I’ve never heard of a would-be surprise attacker being treated with much care. We’ll definitely be executed for their amusement. There will be no kindness for us after we used this method. If we raise our hands in surrender, we’ll just be vaporized! I’m not about to excite people’s living rooms as a shocking year-end news story!!”

“You won’t have to worry about that. In the Information Alliance’s internet culture, television is dead.” The black-uniformed girl smiled coldly. “And you seem to be mistaken about some things, so allow me to correct you. One: The Manhattan 000’s Elite is probably just a figurehead. Its actions are determined by the constant conversations and mutual error corrections between the Capulet AI Network contained in unknown physical devices and the Martini in charge of New York security. Two: I’m honestly skeptical that Capulet has even detected our presence.”

“Um, what do you mean?” asked Myonri.

“They are simply being cautious after what happened to the Olympia Dome. If it could accurately detect our numbers and locations from our heat and magnetic signatures, it would have vaporized us with pinpoint accuracy. It would not blast a huge hole in the ship like this. Why did it carefully ‘remove the fat’ with a smaller secondary cannon instead of vaporizing the entire ship with a powerful main cannon it can fire as many times as it wants? ...The Martini, who we suspect has fallen victim to active self-denial, is not certain. So she is removing everything she is not certain of so we will panic and reveal ourselves.”

“That’s all speculation.”

“Yes. But if you climb up on the deck and fire a shot, then she will be certain. Once the Manhattan 000 detects hostile intent – even from a peashooter – it can rest easy and transform us into sea debris. And this time, it will use one of its many main cannons.”

Wraith slowly moved her lips to repeat the phrase “rest easy”.

In other words...

“The correct choice here is to wait. The Martini holding Capulet’s reins made a mistake due to her active self-denial. Silence will be more helpful than a million bullets here. No matter how suspicious this ship might be, it is officially registered as an Information Alliance supply ship, you are powerless prisoners, and I am a commander who can manage that kind of noncombatant. We have made no mistake and yet the Manhattan 000 fired on us without advance warning. And it fired right into the side of the ship instead of just a warning shot. Their Martini must really be in a crisis right now. AI can’t be charged with human crimes, after all. If this really is a harmless ship, it was all for naught. She’ll have no choice but to admit to the mistake and quickly rescue us.”

“You have no guarantee that we’ll all be saved!!”

“It’s true your odds of survival are pretty low with my plan. But if you challenge the Manhattan 000 to a hopeless final battle, those odds are precisely 0%. Now, which will it be? I know I shouldn’t say this at my age, but even a child could do that math.”

A dull metallic sound followed.

Heivia had aimed his assault rifle at Wraith.

But even more noises surrounded the delinquent soldier.

The other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes aimed identical guns at Heivia’s back. They seemed to be saying sorry in their hearts. Even Myonri was among them with an apologetic look on her face.

“Wait...you’re kidding, right? Whose ass do you think you’re aiming those tiny dicks at?”

“It would appear that everyone except for you is a rock-hard adult.” Wraith teased him by lightly raising her hands, slowly lifting her butt from the floor, and standing up. “It is highly likely that the Manhattan 000 will fire a few more test shots. And even if it doesn’t, the deck will break soon. That could throw us out into the ocean, so grab some oxygen tanks and anything that will work as float. This is a military ship, so it will be well supplied. Frank! Gather a few emergency kits for me.”

The aide young man grabbed a bag hanging on the wall. Whether it was a joke

or not, Heivia bit his lip when he saw it said AED on the side.

“...I refuse to accept your methods here.”

“You don’t have to, but the clock is ticking all the same.” The black-uniformed girl winked and stuck out her tongue a bit. “By my estimate, the next attack will arrive in less than 3 seconds, so...sorry, the time passed while I was talking.”

With a deafening blast, their battlefield was transformed.

All of them were shaken by the intense impact and thrown from the edge of the arch-carved supply ship and into the glittering ocean.

“Bwah!! Bwoh!?”

Heivia misjudged the timing of his landing, so he swallowed a bunch of seawater as soon as his face hit the water’s surface. He somehow managed to get his head above water while his vision spun, but he could not stop coughing. He did not feel like he was getting any air at all.

“...Dammit.”

And he did not have time to choke.

The supply ship’s flimsy deck had broken and the entire ship sank into the ocean as it fell apart. To make sure he was not dragged down with it, Heivia grabbed onto some broken wood that must have originally belonged to a table. The sight before his eyes felt like something from another world altogether.

It was there.

A 20,000 meter length of ordinary skyscrapers was approaching.

Its 700km/h speed was nowhere to be seen, presumably because it had already arrived at its destination. It was motionless. That only made its presence all the more imposing.

If he was looking down from a helicopter while it was lit up at night, it would have been a million-dollar view. But that impossible location rose up from the clear blue ocean. It was like a dragon. A giant dragon with a thick forest growing from its back.

It had completely left the category of modern weaponry.

That was why Heivia's mind erroneously saw it as something from another world.

He was less than 200 meters away from it.

That was barely within range for infantry to target a moving human without the assistance of a scope, but what about for that extraordinary Object? You might understand how he felt if you kissed a crocodile that was larger than you were.

He no longer felt anger at the unreasonable situation he found himself in.

Definite fear now squeezed at his heart.

"It's there. It's really there. And it's way closer than I expected! This is like a sudden close-up of the actor's you-know-what in a 3D movie, goddammit!!"

"Do not fire!!" shouted Wraith while clinging to the same waterproof bag as the aide young man. "Restrain your fear. Silence is the correct answer here. If you don't fire, it will rescue us. This is all over if you touch your guns, you hasty and simple-minded animals. The difference in firepower and armor does not matter. You saw what happened to those 5 Faith Organization Objects, didn't you? Step outside this 'blind spot' and you will be reduced to ashes in an instant!!"

"~!!"

What would that boy have done in this situation?

Would he have found a weakness and challenged this great a monster with just the equipment he had on hand?

Heivia thought and thought but could not find an answer. Heivia Winchell was not Quenser Barbotage.

Something shot by in the sky overhead.

The boomerang-like craft was likely an unmanned spy plane. Relaying information was their entire purpose, but just like a submarine, they only emitted signals when absolutely necessary and used simple circuits for their power system. At any rate, you would never end up with that trimmed-down silhouette with the thick armor and fire-extinguishing equipment needed to

increase a pilot's survival.

“Tch. They're spying on our little swim, dammit!!”

It did not matter if it had missiles hanging from its wings or not. Once they were located, the Manhattan could send any number of shells their way.

Wraith said something like a prayer.

Was it meant as advice for the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, or as a means of calming her own pounding heart?

“Slowly, slowly. Just let the current take you. That will bring us closer to the Manhattan 000... Listen, it can fry an area of several dozen kilometers with a single main cannon blast if it wants to. The one safe zone is right up next to the Manhattan 000 itself. Arrive at point-blank range and it can no longer use its main cannons. We haven't lost and it hasn't escaped. This is the best result. Understand!?”

They did not actually do anything.

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes were carried over to the Manhattan. No, that extraordinary monster had probably taken up that position to begin with. The 200 meters were gone in no time. Their sense of time may have been malfunctioning.

“...?”

Heivia felt an odd bubbly feeling around him.

It was like soaking in a bubble bath or in the jets of a jacuzzi. He looked down at his uniform below the water and saw small bubbles covering it like he was soaking in a carbonated beverage.

Hadn't Taratua, the girl he had shot himself, theorized that it used supercavitation to reduce the resistance of moving through the water?

Heivia's group was carried over to a location that jutted out sharply.

Wraith groaned while she rocked in the waves.

“The downtown district. Lower Manhattan. This is probably where you would normally board the ferry to the Statue of Liberty.”

The distance was now zero. They had arrived at Manhattan.

Heivia managed to grab onto the concrete bank.

He sensed the presence of quite a few people.

“!?”

With no hesitation whatsoever, he obeyed his survival instincts and aimed his assault rifle straight up.

And a moment later...

“Wow. Hey, can I take a picture of that?”

He heard a silly voice.

It was a small child of less than 10.

The boy had an innocent smile that looked out of place in a city that had just been targeted by 5 Faith Organization Second Generations. Was he even aware that there was a war going on?

“That’s a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform, right? I’ve seen videos of those. The southern sea is really dirty. There are all sorts of things floating here.”

In the Central American heat, Heivia froze in place with his soaked weapon still aimed up at the unarmed children who crouched down, aimed the lenses of their phones and game systems his way, and produced electronic shutter sounds.

The children were carrying backpacks and water bottles, so they were probably on a field trip or something.

“Who is this?”

“Teacher, it’s like the person we saw juggling over there!”

“Yes, a street performer. You give them money to tell them they did a good job.”

They threw some change his way like anyone would at the water’s edge in a tourist area.

A soft female voice came from somewhere. It was probably a recorded

announcement.

“Welcome to Battery Park at the southern tip of Manhattan! Why not take a break and enjoy the greenery to recover from sightseeing at the famous Wall Street? At our park...”

Another look around showed a park below the blue sky.

A few speakers stood up from the gently rising hills covered in a carefully-maintained lawn. And beyond that were true skyscrapers. Those were the buildings of Wall Street, the world’s largest financial street.

The field trip children were not the only ones there.

A young wife was stretching on a yoga mat laid out on the lawn. An old man was jogging slowly down the winding path and a large pet dog was running out ahead of its master. There were plenty of people practicing martial arts or playing guitars on the grass.

There was a giant divide between sea and land.

The difference was so great that Heivia could not shake the feeling that he had just traveled through time.

It was peaceful.

He had come across a true safe country.

It was enough to make Heivia and his assault rifle look absurd.

“What the hell...is going on?”

“The eye of the storm may be surprisingly calm. It is always the onlookers and not those directly involved who make the biggest fuss. Which is why you professionals should be more responsible about what you say.”

Wraith must not have been able to get up on the concrete by herself. Drenched, she climbed up into Battery Park with some help from the aide young man pushing up on her small butt.

She then extended her small hand to pull the young man up.

“See? We were right not to fire. Provoking them would have been dealt with like a major crime in a safe country. You would have been shot as a violent

criminal instead of dealt with like a prisoner of war.”

Then they heard the sound of thick rubber scraping on the ground.

Something had approached them at some point. It was probably made of the same substance as a special operations rubber boat. A girl moved across the grass with her butt inside a giant swim ring. There were no apparent tires or treads on the bottom...but as far as they could tell, it was moving as smoothly as a curling stone.

“Oh, Wraith. 419. Long time no see.”

“Hi, Melly. You’ve changed your look again, I see.”



Wraith smiled, but she gave off some slight tension. If this girl was using active self-denial, any past relationship with her was no guarantee of safety.

She was a girl of about 14 with brown skin and a blonde bob cut. The gentle curves of secondary sexual characteristics were contained by what looked like a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson oil paper. It was reminiscent of what one would wear for a massage or medical exam. She held a tablet in both hands...except it may have actually been a notebook-sized game system.

She wore what looked like a backwards baseball cap, but it was not.

Were those special VR goggles?

“Yes. The wheelchair and medical bed were not very promising. I got bedsores on my back. Ever since I partially retired after breaking my spine, the earth’s gravity is pure torture. From there, it was a battle with the literature. In the end, I decided to revert to the basics. 881. I don’t know if you should call it a waterbed or an oil damper, but it’s something like that. I fill this swim ring with a special liquid and then have it vibrate with a set pattern.”

This was Melly Martini Extradry.

If the information they had been given was accurate, she would be the Martini in charge of New York’s security.

She controlled Manhattan over the head of the Pilot Elite. She must not have been used to the male gaze despite her risqué outfit because, when she was exposed to concentrated fire from the eyes of Heivia and the other potatoes floating in the ocean, she pulled her hands back toward her chest like a praying mantis. She somewhat nervously continued as if trying to distract them from something.

“The undercarriage uses a flagellum structure. 791. Okay? Do you remember the insane team that researched the structure of euglenas based on the theory that you could overturn the food chain if you gave plants the ability to move as quickly as humans?”

“Oh, the one where they settled on the conclusion that euglenas aren’t actually plants?”

Wraith looked up at a flower-like security camera looking down at her.

“Is that for more than just decoration?”

Security cameras were all about mutual surveillance. With a square room, you could place a camera in opposing corners to cover both their blind spots. But that distribution grew much more complex outdoors.

The swim ring girl nodded proudly.

“It’s cross-pollination. Whether they use the wind, insects, or birds, flowers can prosper as far as their pollen reaches. That made them incredibly useful as an example of how to set those up to cover for each other.”

“If you were that thorough... Oh, so that’s the basic theory behind the excessively-large Manhattan 000.”

“Turgor pressure is incredible. The Bullmites were the extent of what animal research could handle. At this size, existing examples of muscular and skeletal structure are no use whatsoever. 660. It might be easier to think of it as crossing the divide between plant and animal. A 1000-year-old cedar supports more mass than a whale or mammoth.”

Wraith already looked exasperated, but Melly did not stop. It was not clear if this was her area of interest or if she wanted to keep her mind off of the male gazes focused on her, but she felt the need to say it all. Just like a child showing off their treasure in a local park, the brown girl smiled and raised the game system she held in both hands.

“Tah dah! It’s Stick VR. 721. With smartphones and computers, we reign supreme here in North America, but we just can’t seem to compete with the Island Nation when it comes to video game systems.”

“Hold on. You aren’t making any sense. Weren’t Stick VR and Paste VR rivals?”

“That’s why I forcibly built some compatible software to bypass that. Man, it was quite a job concentrating all of Manhattan’s functions down to this one device. 993. But that improved things immensely.”

It was like she was showing off her level of influence.

The next thing they knew, the gathered children had been casually led away by their teacher. Was Melly monitoring all of Manhattan on that one flat-screen

monitor and could she spy on the 10 million people's personal lives whenever she wanted? What was the actual Elite doing?

Next, they heard the sound of metal fitting together.

Two or three 2-meter quadrupedal animals made of steel and composite armor walked up alongside the girl whose butt was inside the giant swim ring. They were combat support robots modeled after bulls. They could carry weapons, act as shields, search out the enemy, drive the target out from behind cover, or even crash into the target with more force than a large motorcycle. They blatantly rubbed their bodies together. They could communicate without accessing a server by recreating the actions and society of animals.

They did not even need a controller.

Just give them a general target and their programs would have them work as a group to surround and neutralize that target as quickly as possible. The sheep dog did not even need to give any instructions. Those serverless unmanned weapons would work together and achieve victory all on their own as long as they had an objective set. The cowgirl watching over them only had to provide the herd with corrections when absolutely necessary.

Wraith glanced upwards at the 6-petalled flower shape of the devices distributed using the theory of cross-pollination.

"...Everything you do is always so involved."

"789. Manhattan is only one of New York's 5 boroughs, but it contains more than 700,000 security cameras. Of course we're going to make sure they look nice."

Needless to say, those were not the only eyes and ears in Manhattan. Even during the intense fighting with the Faith Organization, Melly must have accurately predicted where on Manhattan Wraith and the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers would wash up. She had clearly sent out that unmanned spy plane to check on the situation.

And with that in mind, the brown girl wearing nothing but a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper asked a question.

"So who are they? 002."

“Oh, them.”

Wraith kept her cool.

And Heivia’s group still had not climbed up onto land. That proved a devastating mistake.

“They’re something of a souvenir. They’re the ones who killed Taratua.”

They didn't even have time to shout.

Wraith took a device the size of a large lunchbox from the young man and tossed it toward the ocean. It was an AED, a medical device that used an electric current equivalent to a stun gun in order to shock the heart.

“Bwah...!?”

The power light flashed and the two electrodes attached by the same curly cables as a home phone flew through the air. The flat electrodes contacted the ocean’s surface. Heivia was already soaked and there was nothing he could do even when he saw it coming.

With a dull bursting noise, the potatoes were neutralized in an instant.

The bright blue ocean disappeared. Everything fell into darkness.

“It seems you didn’t trust me, but did you think I would still have any fondness for you left after you kept threatening to kill me? The Information Alliance maintenance fleet corrupted by Taratua was the worst, but the Legitimacy Kingdom is just as bad for helping. To be honest, I’m sick of it all. You can’t expect someone as honest and straightforward as me to not want to switch sides.”

As Heivia’s consciousness faded, he thought he heard the girl laughing scornfully down at him.

“When you get down to it, I belong to the Information Alliance. The gears shifted out of place after I shot Quenser, but I shouldn’t have had any reason to be trapped between enemy and ally. ...Melly, I will sell them to you as a sign of trust. Will that cover the Manhattan 000’s boarding fee?”

Part 4

Only ten minutes had passed.

“Oh? Is this what their new maple caramel parfait is? It’s just soaked in maple syrup! What does that have to do with the Island Nation!?”

“I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you...”

After leaving the park of betrayal and passing through Wall Street which was often seen in movies and dramas, they found a strange scene filled with Asian writing. It was the area known as Chinatown.

For some reason, Wraith the traitor and Heivia the betrayed were seated at the same table in front of an Asian chain café there. The scene was just as awkward as having a café maid kick you out and later running into her at a nearby convenience store.

The group of drenched potatoes in Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms must have seemed like better content than a kitten climbing into a bag because phone cameras were aimed their way from every direction.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray was equally soaked, but she had a towel draped over her head.

“I didn’t expect this outcome either, so what can I say?” She sounded annoyed. “I never expected the enemy soldiers I sold out to be released into the city with only their weapons confiscated.”

“Speaky! Tell me how to silence this piece of shit!!”

Heivia’s shout was only meant to comfort himself, but the bottle-shaped speaker in the middle of the table provided the clever reply of “Start by taking a deep breath. Some days are like this.”

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had all gathered in one place, but they had not been handcuffed or given GPS ankle bracelets.

The enemy must not have deemed it necessary.

The flower-like stationary security cameras were not the only eyes watching them. They were apparently a rare sight wherever they went because Asian strangers were aiming their phone cameras at the soldiers purely out of curiosity. Having lenses aimed their way from every direction made them feel a certain way.

“It’s like we’re animals in the zoo. I’m going to kill every last one of them...”

“Well, this is probably a cage made of data. Manhattan doesn’t have a prison, so they have several layers of human management at each coordinate.”

Water erupted upwards like a fountain from the fire hydrant at the end of the road.

New York’s proper latitude was similar to Hokkaido in the Island Nation. No one was used to the Central American climate, so they all looked overheated. They could always stay indoors and receive the benefit of air conditioning, but they were so obsessed with finding content for social media that they braved the discomfort and let the fire hydrant’s water cool them off.

“Maintaining a calm facade but going nuts on social media. That’s just how New Yorkers are.”

After giving an exasperated look to those wealthy people who were intent on showing off how unfazed they were that Manhattan had started to move, Wraith grabbed a junk food mini spring roll from a rectangular cardboard container and tossed it into her small mouth.

She winked and pointed at the floral security camera overhead.

“People who put a lot of wasted effort into appearances are willing to die for their pride. Closing yourself up in your room is the ultimate form of self-indulgence, but being closed up by someone else is solitary confinement in prison. You can live in the exact same coordinate in New York, but the label slapped onto you can make that feel like heaven or like hell. That’s probably how the people are controlled.”

“What the hell!? Does it only take you five seconds to forget who you threw under the bus, crazy girl!? Do you have any idea what you did!?”

Heivia shouted angrily and started to stand up, but then a heavy metallic noise rang out.

A 2m composite armor bull that was heavier than a large motorcycle had slowly stood up from where it had been seated on the ground.

Wraith gently raised both hands, winked, and devilishly stuck out her tongue.

“This city has the world’s highest camera density. You heard what she said about the flowers, right? If you don’t learn from the New Yorkers and increase your tech literacy, the government will be spying on you out in reality and on the internet. So until you learn the rules, how about you avoid any actions that might be misinterpreted? Those Bullmites do not use a server and only need their simple circuits to coordinate, but if one tackles you, you’ll be bedridden for the remainder of your life. I’m sure they have you surrounded in an inescapable layout calculated out using big data simulations and baseball data theory. Nonlethal weapons can be a type of sadism. Since they can beat you up without killing you, no one has to hesitate before using them.”

“Curse those weird Bullshits or whatever they’re called...”

“You probably lost another life just now. The question is how many lives you have left before it’s game over.”

Heivia, Wraith, and the others had successfully landed on the extraordinary Object, but they saw no sign of soldiers walking around. The only people they saw were the New Yorkers of that safe country known as the racial salad bowl. Instead of people, the city was being patrolled and protected by unmanned weapons, primarily the Bullmites that kept gently rubbing their bodies together.

And the passersby showed no concern when they saw several dozen soldiers from an enemy nation.

A digital surveillance society was a creepy thing, but at the same time, everyone assumed it was targeted at the anti-government guerillas, enemy soldiers, and other minorities that had been rejected from the larger framework of society. They assumed they would not be affected themselves if they did the clever thing and obeyed.

But in truth, they had no guarantee whatsoever who the unseen observers

would decide to cast out on a whim.

“...This really is the Information Alliance, isn’t it?”

“Oh, is that so?” complained Heivia. “I see where we stand here now, but more importantly, the instant I get my gun back, I’m firing some bullets right up your ass, goddammit...”

A large donut-shaped swim ring slid over like a curling stone and it carried Melly Martini Extradry who only had a game system and a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper. The ring looked like it would flip over on even the smallest slope, but the smiling brown girl maintained perfect balance. This was different from the unmanned weapons that used simple circuits and no server. Just like the game system, the ring may have been directly linked to the Manhattan 000.

The blonde bob cut girl held the family game system that was probably monitoring all of Manhattan, moved freely around in the liquid-filled swim ring, wore VR goggles like a backwards baseball cap, and pulled her limbs in close as if afraid of the potatoes’ gazes.

“Sorry about the wait, Wraith. 650. Oh, would you look at that unusual pairing.”

“Running across them was not exactly reassuring, just so you know.”

“029. They’re on a different layer, so it’s fine. They couldn’t touch you even if you are at the same coordinates. Okay? Now, let’s go!”

Heivia spat on the ground and raised his middle finger, so a composite armor bull knocked over the table and crashed into him. Counting each individual wrong move he had made would be too much work, but it seemed he had just used up his last life. The serverless Bullmites’ simple circuits could apparently comprehend manners.

After leaving the sweaty men, the brown girl with her butt in the swim ring looked more able to spread her wings. And that was more than a figure of speech. Her brown arms and legs had been freed, just like a butterfly spreading its wings after leaving the hard, dry chrysalis.

...Of course, Wraith did not want to let the brown girl notice her own tension.

“Hmm. What is it, Wraith? 202.”

“Well... I was just noticing that you still haven’t lost that habit.”

“I’m only tagging my memories. 751. It doesn’t really mean anything, so just ignore it.”

Wraith had heard before that she added 3-digit numbers within her words to provide arbitrary landmarks to help her accurately recall her memories later on. The numbers could be entirely meaningless. As long as they were not too close together, repeats were fine and even gave the memory an antique feel, so there would be no unintended overwriting of the sort worried about during the Y2K problem.

As New York’s defense commander, Melly held a very important position, but her eccentricities stood out even compared to the other Martinis like Wraith, Dorothea, Alisa, Rica, Orsia, Piranirie, and Taratua.

“New York’s defense commander, huh?”

“Yes, what about it?”

(How much is she involved in all this? Did Capulet simply lend her the Manhattan 000 and its Elite for the benefit of the Information Alliance as a whole? Or has she succumbed to Capulet thanks to an abuse of active self-denial?)

Wraith was definitely suspicious, but she would gain nothing by letting her suspicions be known.

She turned a skeptical eye toward Melly whose butt was inside the swim ring and who only wore a red paper surgical gown.

“...That is quite the outfit you’re wearing. You always dress so oddly.”

“This was driven by necessity, so it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Plus, fashions and common sense can be easily manipulated by continuous statements on social media. After establishing the basic supporting legs of beauty and health, you can add in some charitable and economic effects as the finishing touches. 515. I could make wrapping your naked body in a ribbon this year’s biggest trend and I could create a high society where you’re shunned if you don’t finish

it off with strawberries and whipped cream.”

That sounded like a joke, but no one in the Chinatown aimed their smartphones toward Melly despite how much soft skin she was showing. In fact, their attention was drawn to Wraith in her black military uniform that stood out among all the colorful casual clothes.

...But Melly herself began blushing and trembling a bit with her butt still inside the swim ring. An ominous atmosphere had set in while Wraith was not paying attention.

“...Wait.”

“Oh, excuse me. Heh...heh heh. Everyone just walks by this unusual sight without even noticing. Even though I’m showing an unthinkable amount of skin in an unthinkable location. Heh heh heh heh heh. No, I can’t record this to memory. 081, 099. Yes, yes, I really shouldn’t be. When will they notice? When will someone realize this isn’t right? Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh...”

The black-uniformed girl could only form a small triangle with her mouth and fall silent.

Finding special meaning in no one noticing that something was out of the ordinary was subtly different from a perverted old man who wandered around the late night streets with only a trench coat on. It may have been more like someone who enjoyed the borderline thrill of walking through the crowds of a packed tourist beach in nothing but bikini body paint.

...This would explain the odd tension when Heivia and the others had looked at her. Unlike the residents of Manhattan, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had not been on the receiving end of any data manipulation, so they would have seen the brown girl’s paper two-piece surgical gown without any cognitive filters in place.

“You must have a...stressful job...”

“Oh, what ever are you talking about? 121. Nnn.”

Melly stretched out her arms and legs to take a strange pose atop the swim ring, so her game system may have had bad reception in that exact location. Wraith was very worried that the crimson oil paper covering her soft skin was

going to tear at any moment. Was she invincible as long as she had those cognitive filters? It may have felt something like taking a selfie, but the brown swim ring girl was constantly checking on herself with the countless floral security cameras. In accordance with the concept of cross-pollination, they were positioned so their pollen range just barely overlapped.

“435. Anyway, I never expected you to visit Manhattan like this.”

“How can you say that after you stopped reporting back as your duty requires?”

Wraith and her aide did not even glance over in the direction of the chaos caused by the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes and the two of them walked down the street with the other Martini Series girl. Three of the serverless Bullmites that rubbed their bodies together followed the giant swim ring that was presumably linked to the Manhattan 000.

As far as Wraith could tell, her aide did not “count” in Melly’s eyes. She did not shrink down when his cold, mechanical eyes fell on her.

Or perhaps she viewed him as belonging to someone else.

Swim Ring Girl Melly glanced over at the composite armor bulls and spoke.

“They might seem intimidating, but this is necessary. Also, the Bullmites have air purifiers attached. 223. Try to feel at home around them.”

“That sounds smart, but it’s actually pretty foolish. There’s no point in using those outdoors...”

“You’re underestimating New York, Wraith. 090. This is a shockingly gluttonous polluted region that has the world’s greatest medical development yet can’t brag about its average lifespan.”

They left the Chinatown and continued north into SoHo. As the swim ring passed right behind a uniformed police officer writing a ticket for a car parked on the curb, the brown girl started trembling again. Wraith spoke up while glancing over at the giant window of a luxury shop selling shoes and bags.

“What do you know about Piranirie Martini Smoky? I am speculating that she was using active self-denial.”

“Ahem. Do you mean the method of breaking the Martini Series using an external source? We’re near New Caribbean Island right now and I wouldn’t have brought the Manhattan 000 all the way here if I wasn’t aware of the Ragnarok Script. 381. As New York’s defense commander, I put a stop to it across the entirety of Manhattan.”

“Ragnarok?”

“Oh? You hadn’t discovered that over-the-top name? It seems some Faith Organization rats snuck into the Information Alliance to investigate our vulnerabilities. 115. I left them alone and intercepted every last one of their transmissions to ensure I had the whole picture, but that may have been a mistake. They managed to slip away and I was too slow to react.”

“...I want to ask this directly: Are you still a functioning Martini?”

“If you ask me, Piranirie was so easily corrupted because her stopper had so little influence. 991. Unlike the other Martinis, she always found some excuse to act independently.”

The brown girl smiled and let her bare legs dangle from the donut-shaped ring like she was relaxing at home, but she also looked to a spot next to Wraith.

Melly was looking at the young man who worked as Wraith’s aide.

“I’m jealous. 544. Mine died in the operation that broke my spine.”

“You were the one that refused to accept a replacement.”

“088. Imagine it happened to you. Would you be happy if they said they could supply a replacement so easily?”

After that blunt statement, Melly realized the contradiction of her words and gently shook her head.

Just as the large swim ring she controlled with her notebook-sized game system moved out onto the crosswalk, the crosswalk light switched from red to green. She had grabbed the game system with both hands, held the two detachable controllers with her toes, and stretched out her legs in a mystery pose, so had she done something?

A large truck waiting at the light was loaded full of crouching Bullmites. They

looked like illegally parked bicycles or a wireless industrial power station at a security company that could charge devices by the dozen. It was a mobile power supply truck.

The surgical gown girl trembled a bit while exposed to the crowd's view in all directions at the middle of the large crosswalk.

"Well, I might be much the same since I distract myself from the loneliness by messing with machines. 777. That's essentially the same as being given a replacement."

"..."

This was no time for sentimentality.

The Manhattan 000 had left the Information Alliance home country and come here. And neither the actual Pilot Elite nor Melly Martini Extradry had a partner to act as a stopper. She had a high risk of going berserk just like Piranirie. She had just about reached the peak, but things were looking ominous. Even if she started descending the mountain out of active self-denial, no one would encourage her and tell her to continue toward the peak.

If its owner was to be believed, the swim ring moved so smoothly thanks to an artificial flagellum structure. Once it finished crossing the crosswalk, the brown girl spoke with her eyes lowered toward her game system's screen.

"Do you suspect me of going berserk? 895."

"If you want to clear away the suspicions of another world power using that Ragnarok Script thing to influence the Martini Series, then you at least need to remove the Manhattan 000's Pilot Elite from their cockpit. Showing that you can do that would prove your authority and sanity."

"290. Sorry, but I can't do that."

"Why not?"

As soon as great tension filled Wraith Martini Vermouthspray's small body, the young man by her side inconspicuously altered his position. He was preparing for a response from the Bullmites that coordinated their actions by rubbing their bodies together instead of using EM signals.

But the reality far exceeded his expectations.

The entire area of land shook.

The scale was so great that understanding slipped from their minds. Wraith and the others were in Manhattan, which meant they were on top of a giant Object.

It had moved ever so slightly.

Black-uniformed and blonde Wraith shrieked and clung to the nearby young man like a small child in a safe country, but the brown girl used her notebook-sized game system to hide the smile on her lips.

She could do more than monitor.

Once Melly had composed her expression once more, she lightly waved the game system.

“Didn’t I tell you it was quite a job concentrating all of Manhattan’s functions down to this one device? Okay? I am the Martini in control of New York’s defense. That means I control *everything* related to Manhattan at the center. 808. Yes, and that includes *everything* related to the Manhattan 000 as the world’s largest Object.”

“Are you saying...it’s you?”

Wraith stared in shock as Melly placed the game system itself on her belly, grabbed the two remote-like wireless controllers in her hands, and made some light punches without her hips behind them.

Did the controllers contain gyros, or were the movements being monitored by the floral security cameras set up everywhere based on the theory of cross-pollination that allowed multiple plants to cover each other’s pollen distribution range? The exact method was unknown, but the sound of Melly’s voice clearly changed

Wraith had not noticed at all.

Until now, the ring had been using a surround sound device to place a different sound amplitude over Melly’s voice to alter it in real time.

This was what it sounded like without that support. She oddly pronounced

each syllable very distinctly for a voice that sounded more machinelike than a machine.

“Yes, I have mastered the basics of every single strengthening program. I am #29 in the Martini Series and also the Manhattan 000’s Pilot Elite.”

That should not have been possible.

If the Martini Series could directly manage the Information Alliance’s Objects, Wraith would not be needed to clean up after their troops lost or went berserk.

“Of course, it’s just like the Gatling 033 in that it’s assumed I’ll be working with the AI. Capulet and I eliminate each other’s errors in a symbiotic relationship. I don’t know about the Information Alliance as a whole, but within my territory of New York and inside the Manhattan 000 as an Object, I have greater authority than Capulet.”

In – other – words.

The brown girl once more passed her voice through the machine to stabilize it.

“This Object is mine and mine alone. 217. The Capulet AI Network is only borrowing it over the high-speed lines. Just like remote surgery.”

“That’s ridiculous... Aren’t you afraid of a conflict?”

Wraith was dumbfounded by this product that sounded like suicide to her.

The blonde bob cut swim ring girl responded while waving her thin game system.

“Stick VR. ...I said I had built some compatible software to bypass it, right? 567. Including everything I might need is my style.”

She literally controlled everything in Manhattan.

She had become one with this pricey area of New York.

That explained why Melly could not escape her loneliness.

“But I also use Manhattan to control this assistance device I’m sitting in. Like I said, walking in earth’s gravity is pure torture because of my broken spine. 765. I really am sorry, but I must ask you not to remove my helmet.”

“ ... ”

There was nothing to be done if she was rejecting it. Either way, Wraith could not force anything. One method of neutralizing a sturdy Object was to focus your attacks on the Pilot Elite...but she likely could not use her infighting or assassination trump cards here.

Choosing to oppose Melly Martini Extradry was the same as making a head-on attack on the Manhattan 000. Needless to say, choosing that would end with her being vaporized.

For now, she would have to solidify her position here as much as she could.

“Why did you bring the Manhattan 000 here?”

“Did you think it was all my decision? 915. Even if I wield the dual swords of Martini and Elite, I am still just an individual. There is only so much I can do. In general, everything is the result of my conversations with the Capulet AI Network. I thought it was necessary, so I lent it the Manhattan 000 as the quickest tool available. So, Wraith, the problem is the exact opposite of the one you think it is.”

Of course, if Melly had fallen into active self-denial, she would simply go along with the AI's erroneous decisions. If the mistakes were not pointed out as mistakes, even Capulet would gradually shift off course. But something felt off, so Wraith frowned and asked about it.

“What do you mean by that...?”

“111. The Manhattan 000 has not gone berserk because of a major problem. Nor have I, the checker, been broken.”

Because it was linked with the Manhattan 000, the giant swim ring hopped up with smooth movements to carry Melly up the stone steps as she got to the crux of the issue.

“Capulet detected a large enough external problem to require bringing the Manhattan 000 onto the stage, so it made a swift request to resolve that problem. That is why I lent it this Object. 901. That seems like the most natural way of looking at this.”

“Wait a second. Are you saying...?”

“I had predicted this was about swiftly purging Piranirie after the Ragnarok Script corrupted her, but it looks like that wasn’t all it was. 501.”

This was a completely different idea.

Many things shifted around inside Wraith’s mind and the brown Martini girl asked a question while peering into her eyes.

“So I have a question. Okay? 331. What happened out here near New Caribbean Island? What kind of monster slumbers in the ocean here?”

Part 5

“Heivia, Heivia.”

Myonri had a good reason for sounding so nervous as she called his name.

Sit. Lie down.

The 2m composite armor bull was politely standing directly above Heivia who was collapsed face down on the ground. Even without a server, they were apparently obedient enough to attack delinquent soldiers. They really were well made.

Heivia had been entirely incapacitated and could only squeeze out the voice of a squished frog.

“...Myonri, drag me out of here before this piece of junk starts moving its hips. I wouldn't say I've lived a life that lets me hold my head high in front of the Virgin Mary, but don't you think it's a bit much to let this machine force some bestiality onto me?”

“Um, what are we going to do now?”

Myonri may have gained the ability to automatically filter out anything that would dirty her ears too much. The other potatoes also showed no sign of providing a helping hand.

Myonri was fed up of being spied on by the trumpet or flower-like security cameras that were arranged based on the ability of cross-pollinizing flowers to cover each other's pollen distribution range.

“Manhattan has come all the way to New Caribbean Island, but at the moment, all it has done is come here. Nor does it seem to be preparing to attack anywhere else. In that case...what are we supposed to fight against once we get our guns back?”

“What are you smiling about? Are you interested in what their ass tastes like?”

This is the enemy's greatest Object! There's no sign of the actual Elite, Capulet is putting in overtime under that crazy Martini's control, and they've already used their electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon for a preemptive strike with no advance warning!!"

"So we're just supposed to shoot the innocent people walking around here? Doesn't that seem like the wrong target?" Myonri placed a hand on her slender chin. "It's still unclear whether that...Miss Martini? was using Manhattan to target us in the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance maintenance fleet corrupted by Piranirie. We were the ones that infiltrated that fleet, so if they say they didn't know about it, it would mean we were simply caught in the middle of an internal purge..."

An odd groan escaped Heivia's mouth.

That would mean there had been no act of war in the first place and they would have no reason for a counterattack. That would make Heivia and the Legitimacy Kingdom the aggressors in attacking Manhattan and the Information Alliance.

They had done a lot to hype up how frightening the Manhattan was, but now that they were onboard, they found it was peaceful. It was true it had arrived in the ocean near New Caribbean Island, but it was not moments away from vaporizing the Legitimacy Kingdom military with its extreme firepower. It was a mystery who the Manhattan's opponent was and where it had been targeting with that initial attack. Heivia and the others had not been handcuffed or thrown in a cell. They had been released into the city.

There was nothing they could do now.

The potatoes felt silly for getting so worked up about war.

With nothing here, that macho army had lost their reason to fight. It would have been much simpler if they had discovered a plot to wipe out the human race. Like this, it looked more like they were trying to stir up trouble in the perfectly peaceful city to start a war.

This was a fully controlled society.

People were bound by data.

Heivia had glimpsed the fear of a digital city that did not even need to separate out the criminals. Something deep in the delinquent soldier's heart told him it was all over if he let this break him. So he desperately searched for a reason.

"I'm not going to just go along with this and have my bones buried in the Information Alliance. I have noble blood, so I have to inherit the Winchell family."

"That's a nice idea...but what if they say they're contacting our embassy in preparation to hand us over safely?"

They would break.

Even if nothing of the sort was actually happening, Heivia and the others would break if that Melly girl told them that. While she dodged the issue and stalled for time, they would get used to this, lose interest, and decide this was good enough.

Anyone would be afraid.

If you were thrown out in front of such a colossal weapon and told you had to fight it if you had any complaints, anyone would be scared out of their mind. That was why Myonri and the others were clinging to this temporary peace. If they could not find a reason to continue fighting, then why fight? They wanted support for that conclusion.

But that was not good enough.

For one thing, the words of the Information Alliance could not be trusted. They had to assume those words were like disposable bullets meant to manipulate their target and devour everything of value they had.

They should have learned that lesson already.

Back on that ship's deck when their friend had been helplessly shot to death.

"We-..."

Heivia opened his mouth to resume arguing with Myonri and the others who were about to fall for it.

But he was cut off.

It was a dull and unpleasant metallic noise a lot like a poorly-crafted bell being struck. It came from directly above Heivia who still lay pinned to the ground. It came from the side of that Bullmite. A thumb-sized hole had appeared there and sparks flew from it like a handheld firework or smoke bomb.

Except circuit boards would not spew sparks like that no matter how you damaged them.

This was clearly the work of a chemical meant to fry the circuits.

“A sniper...using armor-piercing incendiary rounds!?”

After an especially large burst of sparks from within the electronics, the entire Bullmite went limp. If it had not collapsed to the side, it might have crushed Heivia under its weight.

But Heivia did not look exactly delighted after gaining the freedom he had so desperately desired.

“Who did that...?”

He asked without thinking, but no one knew the answer. All of the few dozen Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were gathered in this same location, so none of them could have left and prepared a sniper rifle on a building roof.

But that meant nothing to the people around them.

The Asian passersby widened their eyes, held out their many phones, and produced countless electronic shutter sounds.

Heivia’s group could tell they were surrounded by killer intent.

Patrolling Bullmites appeared from around seemingly every corner, as if the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had triggered the cage of data. And the machines were clearly in a different mode than before. Even if they did not use a server, their simple circuits were apparently enough to pick up on their fellow Bullmite’s demise and work together to resolve the situation.

But they were fundamentally wrong. They mistakenly thought the soldiers had broken the rules.

This time, Heivia’s group really would be killed.

“What dumbass did that!?”

There were 700,000 public security cameras and who-knows-how-many phones and drive recorders on top of that. And yet no one could answer that fundamental question.

Who had thrown the stone?

Round 2 had begun.

Part 6

That free and peaceful city looked entirely different now.

The countless security cameras, which were set up according to some big theory about cross-pollination or whatever, were no help at all. They would not clear the soldiers' names of this false accusation.

"What the hell, what the hell, what the hell hell hell!?"

Even if someone else had thrown the rock, they had to deal with the pests that erupted out of the hornet's nest. But Heivia and the others had no weapons, so they only had one option. If they did not run away, they would die. All of them would be killed together. The Bullmite on Heivia's back had collapsed, so he had to get up and run through the Chinatown.

"Wh-where are we supposed to run to!?" asked Myonri. "All 20,000 meters of this place is on top of an Information Alliance Object!!"

"If you really want an answer, then put your hands on your knees, stick your ass out toward them, and take the time to think! Me? I'm running!!"

After turning a corner in the Chinatown, Heivia found an ordinary gun barrel aimed his way.

"!?"

He grabbed and twisted the attacker's wrist and slammed them back-first into the ground only to find it was a college student.

"Why does a civilian have such a big submachine gun!? Are these easier to get than the Island Nation's Stick or Pokemamo!?"

When Heivia fired a few warning shots into the air, the passersby all crouched down and hid below tables and benches. In what seemed to be a sign of surrender, they tossed guns and cartridges out like money offerings. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers did not have time to take them all while they fled,

but in something like marathon runners at a water station, they all ended up with guns from a variety of makers.

“There is something seriously wrong with the North American market,” said Heivia. “Aren’t there more guns than on the battlefield?”

“Revolvers, shotguns, submachineguns...are these really all for self-defense?” asked Myonri. “Uwehh, there’s even some LMGs and sniper rifles...!?”

Guns was more reassuring than no guns, but the serverless and highly-coordinated Bullmites were designed to be used as shields. A machine would not die even if you shot it in the head or chest.

“Normal bullets” was not going to do the trick, so they selected lightweight weapons rather than powerful ones.

Increasing their firepower was not going to stop the Bullmites.

“Oh, honestly!!”

Heivia raised the submachinegun almost on reflex, but it was no use. He was up against machines. Threats would be useless and a stream of 9mm bullets would only be deflected by the thick armor. Given how many civilians were cowering around them, ricocheting bullets would be too great a threat.

They were not alive.

They did not fear destruction.

Did the rules really change this much when unmanned weapons were sent to the battlefield?

That was when a “silver bullet” arrived in advance of its gunshot.

The armor-piercing incendiary round could punch through the thick armor and fry the circuit boards within using great heat. After being fired down from some roof or another, the sniper bullet punched through the transformer controlling a traffic light, so a large truck drove through and targeted Heivia’s group.

Yes.

The problem was that the “silver bullets” were not just targeting the

monsters.

“Watch out, dammit!! God, this is a terrible orgy!! You never know when you’re going to get a face full of squid stink!!”

The truck drove right over a concrete barrier that doubled as a flowerbed and came to a half-crushed stop just short of hitting the delinquent soldier. But he did not have time to catch his breath. The mystery sniper fired a few more shots into a nearby park, calling that area’s Bullmites toward the soldiers. Just like gathering the attention of an isolated enemy in an online game.

“That sniper is following us,” said Myonri.

“Are they jumping from building to building? Hey, if you’re not using that plastic sniper rifle, toss it here! Silencing that gloomy Peeping Tom takes top priority!!”

That said, real snipers were not like in movies. You could not just look up and see them leaning out from the building. They seemed to be running along the roofs of the buildings alongside the sidewalk Heivia’s group was running down, but it was not clear where exactly they were.

There were countless floral security cameras set up, but they were arranged with the flow of people in mind. Simply put, monitoring the populated streets came first and the sky overhead was less closely watched.

Meanwhile, another Bullmite pushed in to cut off their path.

“That isn’t going to work even if you fire at it head on!”

“That’s not what I’m doing, you idiot!! Bukkake-ing on a mech’s face isn’t my idea of fun!!”

Without even using the scope, Heivia fired a high-speed rifle bullet at the fire hydrant at the end of the road. Those animal types had little surface area in contact with the ground for their weight, so they were in trouble when they lost friction. That was obvious when nothing but four small hooves were used to control the same weight as a large motorcycle.

Myonri and the others fired more bullets as the Bullmite slipped and toppled over, but that only sent sparks flying from the armor. Not even concentrated

fire on a defenseless enemy had any effect.

“What do you think about that sniper!?” asked Heivia.

“Well, I definitely don’t want to be their friend!!” replied Myonri.

“Not that. I’m just talking about their skill.”

The torrent from the fire hydrant had knocked over a window washer’s bucket of industrial detergent, so the Bullmite slipped even more than expected and could not seem to get up. When it could not move, it seemed to have difficulty using its motions to communicate with the others. Thus, the other units did not move to help it. And the potatoes were not about to stay in one place. Heivia had to click his tongue and jump right over the mass of composite armor that could not return to the fight and kept spinning around and around like a giant pinwheel firework.

“They destroyed a traffic light to send in a truck and they provoked the Bullmites into attacking. Why are they being as indirect as a literary girl with a crush? All they need to do is fire bullets straight into our heads!!”

“Um, maybe they hope to make it look like an accident?” suggested Myonri.

“They’re using armor-piercing incendiary rounds. That’s more than just repacking a used cartridge bought from a gun shop. These bullets will stand out a lot more than the used gum all over the sidewalks, so there’s no room for a conspiracy there.”

They fired occasional warning shots into the air to deter the sniper who they still had not located. Normal bullets would not work on the Bullmites who pursued them in a coordinated fashion without using a server. After making sure the sporadic gunfire had rid the area of civilians, Heivia fired his sniper rifle straight into the air.

A crane’s wire snapped and several steel beams fell from a building under construction.

“Those things can still move after a direct hit!?”

“You need at least as much firepower as a powered suit!” said Myonri. “More importantly, what were you trying to say about that sniper?”

“There’s more to sniping than just distance and wind direction. Machine assistance can make up for the scientific side of things, but the more social side of it is harder. You have to predict what your target will do and place the ballistic trajectory where they will be next. This sniper was always targeting things that are easy to predict: Bullmites that have no fear of death and a stationary transformer. For those, all you need to do is line up the crosshairs in the scope.”

Realistically, Heivia’s group was as cornered as could be.

But he proposed a bold theory all the same.

“This sniper is only an amateur virgin. They’re not confident then can satisfy us, so they’re firing on the easier mechanical targets instead.”

In that case, what was the attacker’s field of expertise?

The sniper attacks with armor-piercing incendiary rounds were a lot like extremely small-scale explosions. They were also good at figuring out how gadgets like the Bullmites worked. They ignored the preparations on both sides of the fight to throw the scene into chaos and achieve more than their skill would normally allow for.

...Come to think of it, hadn’t *someone* well known to Heivia nervously attempted some machine-assisted sniping to rescue the Princess in the Alaska District?

(You’re kidding, right...? I’d love it if he’s alive, but he wouldn’t make his appearance like this, would he!?)

He heard what sounded like a thick metal clasp fitting into place.

He looked back while running and his eyes bulged. At some point, the composite armor bulls had received attachments resembling backpacks or saddles. And attached to those were a light machinegun, grenades, and a small container magazine that resembled a cooler.

It was as unfair as finding the relentless zombies had started cleverly aiming guns your way.

“What the hell is this...!?”

That was when the sign for a subway station entered the corner of his vision.

It was all over if those guns opened fire across the surface street. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and the innocent civilians who had evacuated indoors would be caught by it. Heavy machineguns used bullets thicker than a thumb, so they could tear through glass and concrete like it was styrofoam. Heivia gestured to the other potatoes and they all ran down the stairs.

“Do you really think this will save us!?” asked Myonri.

“How should I know!? Go call tech support!! But this will at least distance us from the sniper on the roofs. And underground, the 2D map alone won’t be enough. Plus, Manhattan has turned all around with no concern for the cardinal directions, so we can only hope those things will lose track of where they are...”

War was generally a contest over who could take more lives.

Thus, they would have to change how they fought when up against lifeless unmanned weapons.

Hearing the commotion, some benevolent station workers started to come out with stun guns, but Heivia’s group aimed their real guns over to force them back while running through the chaotic ticket selling area and jumping over the ticket gate.

They heard further angry shouts and screams from behind.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“Damn, did it not work!? Are they using microwaves or submillimeter waves or something!?”

“Could you please explain what this means!?” asked Myonri. “I thought the Information Alliance’s unmanned weapons were autonomous and didn’t need to access a server!”

He did not have time for that. They were dead if those things caught up.

The floral security cameras were installed here too, so the Martini would know where they were. That limited what the potatoes could do. They would be trapped if they kept running and returned to the surface through a different exit. And even if they ran to the platform, Heivia doubted they would find a

train conveniently about to depart like in a drama.

“It would only be the same standard wireless LAN that can misdirect the selfie a bored housewife meant to send to the guy she’s cheating on her husband with. Could we jam it!?”

“We don’t have any equipment, you moron!! Stop asking for the impossible! And why are you so fixated on signal interference? They’ll keep coming for us even if we cut off the cameras monitoring us, right!?”

They did not even have 10 seconds to think. Even a human could run across the 100-meter structure in that time.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“Anyone with a hand to spare, gather as many fire extinguishers as you can!!”

“Heivia?”

“Head down to the platform!! Hurry! It’s meaningless if they catch up!!”

The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers more jumped down the stairs than ran as they rushed to the subway platform. As expected, no train conveniently slid up to the platform. The platform was empty on both sides and the college students and housewives waiting for a train all ducked down in shock when they saw the many guns.

“What are we going to do!?” asked Myonri. “Run into the tunnel!?”

“What good is playing tag with machines in a long, straight tunnel? More importantly, give me the fire extinguishers! All of them!!”

Heivia snatched away the red metal containers and aimed the hoses at a surprising location: the track below the platform.

“Subways send the power through the bottom instead of the top.”

“What does that matter?”

“How do those bull bastards track their location and their destination while the Manhattan turns? I’m guessing they use EM waves.”

“But weren’t we told that unmanned weapons can move around while offline?”

“It doesn’t have to be on a military bandwidth. It could be signals for TV, radio, cellphones, or whatever else. EM waves are waves, so the Doppler Effect comes into play. By reading the signals flying around, they can tell how Manhattan is moving. The unmanned weapons use that as a virtual compass to track their own location. Wraith said submarines are the ideal form of an unmanned weapon, right? If they’re only passively receiving the signals, they don’t have to worry about the enemy locating them!”

Which meant...

“The Bullmites didn’t get lost while underground because the microwave and submillimeter wave broadcast signals can penetrate the thick concrete. But if we use jamming to mess with the EM Doppler, they should lose track of their location and stop moving! So let’s go with a corona discharge. The third rail is normally kept at a distance so it won’t cause any interference, but if we place an impurity nearby, that will change!”

The spraying sound was like an amplified version of a carbonated beverage.

The bubble-type fire extinguishers launched their liquid chemical beyond the platform.

A moment later, they heard a lot of noise from the stairs. The quadrupedal Bullmites with a firearm attachment came crashing down toward the platform.

Myonri and the others immediately aimed their shotguns and submachineguns that way.

Their trigger fingers remained motionless.

The Bullmites had suddenly gone limp, lost their balance on the stairs, and started rolling.

The collapsed unmanned weapons did not move again.

Myonri and the others kept their guns aimed at them for a while afterwards.

“Have they...stopped?”

“A corona discharge doesn’t make a bunch of noise like a stun gun, so it can be hard to tell anything is happening. Locating a power line was not easy since New York likes to bury everything from national secrets to broken massagers,

but I figured a train's power rail would be enough to jam the EM Doppler."

With this electromagnetic interference, any photos sent from an amateur's phone would not reach their recipient. That meant they did not have to worry about any "unintentional spies". Heivia used his sniper rifles to shoot out each of the security cameras installed directly around the platform.

He was a capable boy as long as he was not up against an Object.

"Okay. We've finally built a blind spot, so let's change clothes and get the hell out of here. Just like swapping cars in a parking garage or below an overpass."

Just then, there was a deep noise and the windowless subway platform was wrapped in deep darkness.

"We truly apologize for the inconvenience. The power to this station has been cut to troubleshoot a problem. Lights, air-conditioning, communications, and other services will be brought back one at a time, so to avoid tripping, please remain in place unless a station staff member provides evacuation guidance..."

The sudden darkness was like having a video game unexpectedly switched off.

Heivia worked his imagination while listening to the unnecessary announcement and then he gave a shout

"Crap!! Cutting the power stops the corona discharge!!"

He could not see his hand in front of his face in this darkness, but he could hear several metallic sounds. Needless to say, machine eyes had a greater visual range than human ones. The power outage meant nothing to them. With no power to the subway's third rail, the EM Doppler would recover and the Bullmites would be unstoppable.

Myonri gave a short shriek right next to him.

"Eek!?"

"Don't fire at random!! You don't know where the civilians are in this darkness!!"

"Then what do we do!? They effectively have night-vision goggles, so they can fire accurately!"

Their firearms were commercial products taken from random people, so they were not up to military standards and were not equipped with the various cameras and sensors those soldiers were accustomed to.

In the end, Heivia Winchell could not become Quenser Barbotage.

And a moment later, the massive machines rushed in like charging bulls.

Part 7

Heivia had no idea what happened in the darkness then.

To start with the result, the Bullmites did not turn them to Swiss cheese. Someone's hands reached in from behind, covered or grabbed his mouth and dominant hand, and then pulled him away. He heard no gunshots in the meantime. This third party was not suppressing the noise and light with silencers and flash hiders. Even those would have left some sign of gunfire.

Nevertheless, the Bullmites did not pursue.

After passing through two thick metal doors, brilliant light stabbed into eyes adjusted to the dark.

His vision did not return for a while.

"When in combat mode instead of marching mode, the Bullmites choose their targets based on microwave anti-personnel radar and walking-pattern analysis instead of simple image analysis using a camera."

Heivia heard a smooth female voice.

It belonged to the mystery person using their hands to keep him from speaking or using his dominant hand.

"Your pseudo-jamming using a corona discharge affected not just the EM Doppler but also the EM scan used for their autonomous decisions. It was a decent idea, but it seems it could not knock out the proper radar equipment."

"Bwah!"

Heivia was finally released.



As his vision gradually returned, he and the other potatoes quickly glanced around to grasp their situation. First of all, they were in a narrow stone tunnel with orange mining lights hanging down at even intervals. His mouth had been covered by someone in an Information Alliance officer's uniform who had long silver hair and brown skin. The soldiers serving her were also from the Information Alliance.

Once his eyes adjusted, it did not seem like enough.

Below those dim lights, the beautiful brown woman with silver hair introduced herself. She had an adult face and voice that were used to smiling.

"I am Lendy Farolito. My rank is lieutenant colonel."

"I'm not going to shake that hand which could have been holding anyone's you-know-what. I'm sick of you Information Alliance people using us as your pawns. Besides, those Bullmites are your unmanned weapons, aren't they?"

"If we were working with the Martini, do you really think we would be hiding in this 'gap'? If we had control over those things, we could have removed ourselves from the list of targets in advance."

The brown beauty named Lendy sounded exasperated, but Heivia and Myonri did not understand what this dark underground path even was.

However, there were no floral security cameras or bull-like Bullmites here. Melly Martini Extradry's ubiquitous eyes did not exist here. That was enough for this dark subterranean path to feel far more liberating than the open city streets. ...Although that may have been Heivia admitting that he was Manhattan's enemy.

"Is this city nothing but secrets on top of more secrets...?"

"This is the Underground Railroad. ...And I do not mean it is a literal railroad located underground. This is a free space modeled after the organization that secretly rescued many slaves and helped them escape to safety during the civil war of an older age. The privileged class who were sick of this surveillance society altered the construction blueprints to create this 'gap'. It is primarily used by students of Manhattan's Columbia University and by Wall Street brokers and lawyers who graduated from there. ...Since they could dig

something like this without causing any real harm, the Manhattan 000 must be built thick down into the ocean.”

“N-no matter what anyone is trying to say, it always sounds like they’re bragging about the Manhattan’s specs. I have no idea if you’ve saved us or not...”

The problem was the scale of it all.

And Lendy nodded toward dumbfounded Myonri.

“In the Information Alliance, the powerful rule the weak through information management. There is always a risk that the higher ups are well aware that we believe we have fooled them. You should assume there is no such thing as a perfect safe zone.”

They had no words in response to that.

They still could not tell what was going on, but it seemed the Information Alliance was not a monolith. There were two groups: the standard one that had sent the Bullmites to finish off Heivia’s group, and the special group that had gathered the potatoes and taken them to a surveillance blind spot.

Lendy brought a hand to her slender chin.

“We too are focused on the Manhattan 000’s actions. In this case, that means the actions of the Capulet AI Network, which even the military has stopped worrying about the hardware side of, and the Martini, who is constantly conversing with that network. We have decided someone has to apply the brakes on the entire affair. Even if the AI is correct, its decisions will eventually stray from the truth if the inspector Martini continues giving it inaccurate responses. We have an idea of how to apply the brakes, but you need more than a trump card to play a game. We needed to gather enough ‘normal cards’ to reach the point where we can play that trump card.”

“Thank you very much for ignoring everything we’ve said. You will be pleased to know that being ignored by silver-haired brown-skinned young women has a way of making me nice and hard. Also, what about that sniper? Based on what you said, the natural assumption is that you stirred up that trouble to drive us down into the subway station.”

“...That would certainly be nice.”

However, Lendy’s response was a surprise.

Heivia had expected either a yes or no answer that might be an attempt to deceive them.

“We are at as much of a loss as you are about that, so I don’t know what to tell you.”

The brown beauty shrugged.

And she said it.

“It seems some other problem has arisen even as the Information Alliance is split in two over the Manhattan 000. This appears to be a different force altogether.”

Part 8

The person on a high-rise building roof had also come to a stop.

They were only 70cm away from one of the floral security cameras set up based on the theory of multiple plants providing mutual pollen range coverage, but that did not matter since they were outside the visual range supplied by the trumpet or megaphone shape.

Manhattan's limited land meant it was densely packed even for New York. The building density was even greater than Shinjuku or Hong Kong. Jumping from building to building might sound like a superhuman action, but as long as you had the guts, it was perfectly possible with average muscle strength. You just needed the mentality to treat a tightrope walk the same whether it was 1 meter off the ground or 1000 meters off the ground.

The subway station that Heivia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had run inside had 4 entrances. The slender person had taken up a position where they could see all of them, but they finally released a quiet sigh. They left their firing stance and leaned out over the concrete edge using the semiauto sniper rifle as support. Viewing the situation on the surface was more important than that device covered in cameras and sensors.

They set their emotions aside and rationally analyzed the situation.

...The targets had apparently escaped. There may have been a "hole" somewhere.

That was when the person heard an unpleasant buzzing as if from a mosquito or fly.

The device looked like a three-sided square frame holding a giant top instead of a globe. It was similar to a gyro, but somehow different. It was a serverless unmanned drone that used coaxial rotors to fly and used its simple circuits to guide its power system.

It did not matter whether or not it was aiming any weapons the person's way. As long as it transmitted their location, a precision-guided missile or special unit could be sent in.

But there was no concern on the person's face.

They reached for their skinny waist, pulled some things from a too-large waist pouch, and attached them to their face: a nose, eyebrows, lips, and – just to be on the safe side this time – left and right cheeks. It looked like the Island Nation's *fukuwarai* or like a joke nose and glasses.

Or it would have if they had not been acquired by stripping the raw flesh from unknown youths.

It was an utterly grotesque montage, but they could not hide their eyes that way. They dealt with that by covering their eyes with their golden bangs.

“Yay. Peace, peace.”

That must have been enough for the facial recognition to fail. The person formed peace signs with both hands and the drone landed on the roof like it had lost sight of its target. It used top-like motions to move around the slender figure a few times, but ultimately flew off into the air again.

The person's face was covered by a cold and damp sensation similar to putting a used shirt back on, but they did not seem to mind.

They caused the existing preparations to crumble away so they could achieve results greater than should have been possible.

And to that end, they would not hesitate to do things that would have been unthinkable under the standards of clean wars.

...The facial feature they had the least of was upper lips at just 3. They had a full 8 sets of 10 fingers for fingerprints. They knew they would have to replace them frequently, but at this point, just the harbor security group did not feel like enough. They might have to head down and “resupply”.

The person had infiltrated Manhattan using essentially the same method.

Innumerable uncollected corpses from both the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been floating in the ocean around New Caribbean

Island. And Faith Organization ones had joined those after the Olympia Dome incident. The person had made their preparations by collecting a random person, removing their skin, and wrapping that around their body like a costume. Then they had floated on their back as if doing the backstroke to let the ocean current carry them to Manhattan's harbor area while disguised as a corpse.

Of course, if an actual human had seen that, they would have immediately realized something was off about the suspicious figure wearing a bloated skin, but once the person was close enough, that hardly mattered. Defeating the harbor security had been easier than slaying a dragon in a hunting video game and then it had been time for the skinning.

...The person had not expected Heivia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers to be so concerned for their surroundings. Such a wonderfully extraordinary Object was right in front of them. And what was more important than teamwork?

If they were to crush the Information Alliance, the person really wished those soldiers had gone on an indiscriminate rampage and gathered lots of unnecessary attention.

But a failure was a failure and they would never get anywhere if they did not accept the truth. They set aside the sniper rifle covered in cameras and sensors and quickly switched to a different weapon.

This was the weapon they really wanted to use.

"Yes. Hand Axe."

The person put back on the backpack filled with the clay-like plastic explosive and spun one of the pen-like electric fuses in their hand.

Acquiring the genuine product had not been easy given the circumstances, so they had to make sure they made it count.

Part 9

The Underground Railroad was a very narrow place.

Even so, Heivia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

“As we explained earlier, we consider the Manhattan 000’s current state to be ‘berserk’. Capulet itself might be pure, but if the Martini meant to inspect it has given incorrect responses, it will not know whether it is right or not.”

Silver-haired, brown-skinned Lendy Farolito began speaking while leading the way through the oppressive-feeling underground pathway. Turning her back on enemy soldiers and walking so that her butt wiggled below her short skirt may have been a way of showing her trust.

“Active self-denial, was it? Regardless, we cannot trust this Martini Series, so I doubt attempting to contact Melly would be of any value. It would only reveal our location to her. Meanwhile, the Pilot Elite has almost zero presence, so the Martini must control the Manhattan 000 through the process of rejecting errors as she and Capulet pit each other’s ideas against each other. If we silence Capulet ourselves, the Martini should have trouble controlling the Manhattan 000 on her own.”

“You aren’t telling us to break this giant island in half like a cookie, are you? Or are we supposed to sneak deep inside the Object and kill the Elite? We’re not a toy hidden in some old lady’s dresser drawer.”

“Our plan is not that reckless.”

After the pathway took countless right-angle turns, they finally entered an open space.

It seemed about the size of a city pool. A few dozen people in black uniforms different from Heivia and Myonri’s military uniforms were seated on the floor

with their backs against the wall. It was unclear how they had gotten them in here, but a few bulletproof off-road vehicles were parked inside.

Lendy took some paper bags from her black-uniformed subordinates(?) and passed them around to Heivia's group.

"What are these?"

"Some New York specialties."

"...They aren't more guns, are they?"

"I don't even want to think about what kind of misconceptions you have about New York."

The brown beauty sounded exasperated as she pulled out things like banana smoothies and salmon bagels that were practically salads. They were colored a toxic blue. There were even some pink cupcakes to fill the dessert category. It was all very Information Alliance-like. The lineup was clearly designed to look good on social media.

When she saw the skeptical looks on the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes' faces, Lendy took a bite of a bagel herself. Convinced they were not poisoned, Heivia, Myonri, and the others finally accepted the food they had been distributed.

"Dammit, why does food from the enemy have to be so tasty and healthy?"

"If they didn't grow so reliant on doctors and end up marinated in different drugs, they might be unbeatable."

Everyone's focus gathered on Lendy who led the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes toward one of the off-road vehicles. She knocked lightly on the rear door's smoked glass and spoke.

"We have gathered some usable personnel. Although it seems one of them is missing."

"...Is that so? Oh ho ho."

"Wait..." said Heivia with a frown.

He could not see her and he only had the voice through the intercom to go on. It was possible the vehicle itself was empty and the voice was being sent

over the internet from somewhere else entirely.

Still, the delinquent soldier spoke up after removing the banana smoothie straw from his mouth.

“Is that the Rush’s Elite...?”

“The Gatling 033, you mean.” Lendy must have been particular about information because she corrected him. “This girl’s Object contains the Juliet System for testing. The truth is, the Information Alliance’s Capulet AI Network is an expanded version of Juliet which is closely related to the Gatling 033, or the Rush as you know it. Of course, Capulet has also been connected to the Montague General Database developed from the Romeo collection of big data.”

“Capulet and Montague. Shakespeare’s two major families?”

“Yes, but they are no more than project names. Whether there is really a one-to-one relationship between the machines is still a major question. Everyone claims to be an expert, but it’s possible no one actually knows what Capulet truly looks like,” noted silver-haired and brown-skinned Lendy. “By the way, the research team forced to develop them thought that only tragedy would result from connecting the two to form a single giant system. Regardless, Juliet and Capulet belong to the same family, so they are compatible. Thus, this girl can intervene if she gives it her all. The Martini Series seems to use its thousands of members to divide up the work so each one only converses with a section of the Information Alliance, but this girl can converse with the entirety of the AI network on her own. It feels exactly the same as the control system she is familiar with, so she should be able to work with the entire giant Capulet AI Network.”

Lendy breathed a gentle sigh.

“For now, we will sever the connection between Capulet and the Manhattan 000. It is unclear how involved the Martini in charge of New York’s defense is, but I doubt she can fully control such a large piece of hardware without Capulet’s support.”

“So it’s like a young wife who is a good cook but is helpless when the power goes out and she can’t use all her electronic kitchen gadgets?”

“It may be closer to having the recipe site she relies on shut down. If we can safely stop the Manhattan 000, it should bring a stop to the chaos starting to spread around the world.”

“If that was true, you wouldn’t be curled up like a hair in this dark underground blind spot. What are you plotting, you damn Information Alliance schemers?”

“There have been issues...”

This time, Lendy Farolito sighed with a truly troubled look on her face.

“The Manhattan 000 revealed itself to be the world’s largest Object, but it began as a section of New York that anyone could enter. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find safe country civilians here.”

“And?”

“...Around the time the Manhattan 000 revealed itself, this girl’s father disappeared.”

Lendy turned back toward Heivia’s group who were wholly focused on stuffing their mouths with bagels and she leaned back against the side of the bulletproof off-road vehicle.

The voices outside could not pass through the thick door without using the intercom.

“We have searched the best we could, but there is only so much we can do. We have yet to locate him, so her condition could hardly be worse. And our military doctor and battlefield counselor have agreed with that assessment. She could not produce her normal results if she made the attack now.”

“...”

That might sound silly for the military where everything was fully controlled by rules and regulations, but psychological condition was one of the factors used when selecting soldiers for special operations like snipers or the bomb squad. And that was all the more true for a Pilot Elite where a single individual was in charge of so much more.

“That girl is so fond of her father Royce that, no matter how hard her

schedule must be as both an idol and an Elite, all it ever takes is a single morning call from him for her to get out of bed.”

Lendy narrowed her eyes a bit and shook her head.

“Anyway, forcing her will not give us the result we want. We have to start by collecting her father somehow or another. And he of course must be collected safely.”

“That’s a nice tear-jerking story, but it’s not making my you-know-what any harder. You want us to search for a single person in the densely-packed skyscrapers of Manhattan? Including the visitors, aren’t there 10 million people in Manhattan?”

“We have a general idea. I said we had searched as much as we could, didn’t I?” Lendy breathed a heavy sigh. “When all this began, contact with her father was lost at northern Central Park. There was *some* chaos when the Manhattan 000 activated. Not enough to cause injuries, but the people at work or sightseeing for the day were stranded with nowhere to spend the night, so the hotels and other lodging facilities have been overwhelmed. It seems some large public facilities have been opened for people to temporarily stay, free of charge.”

Lendy raised a hand and one black uniform tossed her a notebook-sized tablet. All unnecessary transmissions had of course been switched off.

“This is a photo of Mr. Royce. The very first thing we tried was his cellphone. We could not reach it or its location information. I seriously doubt a journalist like him would shut off his phone in a situation like this, so a third party has probably confiscated it.”

“And I guess that could be more than just a Martini Series plot. A thug would probably see a middle-aged man’s smartphone as a source of quick cash. You can find people taking advantage of chaos anywhere.”

“That does not change the top suspect, though.”

This female commander spoke in a polite but cold way that was different from Frolaytia.

“Since it is not possible to directly contact Mr. Royce, we must follow the

manual and predict the flow of people. Past Central Park is Uptown. One landmark of Morningside Heights to the northwest is Columbia University, an Ivy League school. All of the stranded people in that area would have been brought there.”

“So we have to drag the Elite’s father from there for an emotional reunion?”

“Yes. The northern end of Central Park borders Harlem, but the public order is not exactly perfect in some areas. It is highly unlikely that a large group of outsiders unfamiliar with the local rules would have gone there. If that girl’s father is safe, he would probably have gone to the university in Morningside Heights along with the others.”

“Unlikely and probably, huh? ...You’re telling us to risk our lives on something vaguer than a young boy’s image of a woman’s crotch?”

“We searched as much as we could. ...This Underground Railroad is not enough to build a route directly there. The only option is to step out onto the dangerous surface and forcibly fight our way through Manhattan’s streets while the Capulet AI Network and Martini Series know where we are.”

Heivia’s group had already fought and fled from those unmanned weapons, so they understood the gravity of that statement.

Plus...

“As I said, there is also an unpredictable third party on the Manhattan 000. You should know that after they used a sniper rifle and armor-piercing incendiary rounds to send the Bullmites after you. We have no way of managing the risks en route.”

Part 10

It was a strange feeling.

“Nn...”

Oh Ho Ho tilted her head and its gorgeous ringlet curls while removing her clothes within the black vehicle. She was changing out of her casual clothing for walking around the city and into her skintight special suit for Object piloting, but there were a large number of eyes directed her way with only a single pane of glass between them.

That said, it was smoked glass, so even though she could see them, they would be unable to see her. She knew that, but she still felt their nonexistent gazes prickling her soft skin as she bared it.

They couldn't actually see her, could they?

They weren't just pretending not to see even though they could, were they?

“It's the same dynamic in miniature.”

The information traveled only one way. The powerful had the weak's information, but the weak did not even imagine the powerful were spying on them. That was the essence of the Information Alliance. In this case, was Oh Ho Ho watching the group through the smoked glass, or was the group pretending that was the case while they watched her? Only a higher authority who could view this from a higher perspective could make that judgment. And that authority would be monitored by someone higher still. It continued on and on like that.

It was all so absurd.

Normally, knowing it was smoked glass would settle the issue. The slender girl sighed, removed her surprisingly childish underwear (which might surprise her fans if they saw it) and then put on the special suit designed just for her. Some

Pilot Elites wore underwear and others did not, but Oh Ho Ho wore her special suit over an otherwise nude body. The decision often came down to the role the suit played and how the Elite viewed it. Oh Ho Ho saw it as a swimsuit rather than outerwear or underwear, so it felt odd to her to wear underwear below it.

“There we go.”

After pulling it up to her neck, the girl finished putting on the special suit. However, every one of Oh Ho Ho’s bodylines showed through, down to each and every rib.

Juliet and Capulet.

The two control systems were compatible thanks to their development history.

(It’s annoying that the Gatling 033 itself isn’t getting any focus, but I can live with that. No one is more suited to this task than me.)

If the Legitimacy Kingdom was involved in this, would that boy make an appearance?

There were not many of them, but it was still a few dozen. She was not sure of exactly who was there.

And she could not deny that she did hope that he was one of them.

“Oh ho ho. I am the star today. I am the heroine in the spotlight!”

Part 11

“Tell me if you get tired. I’m freed from the earth’s gravity, so I can’t tell when we’ve been walking too much. 636. It was for times like this that I expanded the number of unmanned taxis and had New York’s subway cleaned up a fair bit.”

“...Are you planning to bring that ring on a taxi or train?”

“That...might be a good idea. 984. The driver or station attendant helping me in would be watching as my toes wiggled. Would that break the spell over them? They might realize it isn’t normal. Heh heh heh heh heh.”

That had been a mistake. One careless statement had brought out the perversion that was usually masked by the girl’s calm mood. It was scary that she was also an Elite.

While the Martini monsters named Wraith and Melly discussed matters, they entered Central Park.

Manhattan was normally lined with towering skyscrapers, but a rectangular area had been cut out of the city for a giant green park nearly 4 kilometers long.

Except there was no sign of that anymore.

A slit had opened in the center of the ground and then the park opened upwards like double doors. And a giant diagonal tower stuck out from that massive rectangular hole. Two barrels of different sizes were stacked on top of each other like an assault rifle with a grenade launcher attached below.

The black-uniformed girl grimly narrowed her eyes.

“The electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon.”

“Really conspicuous, isn’t it? 439. The Manhattan 000 actually has 44 different main cannon systems, but everyone focused on this one. It’s like they don’t even try to imagine what’s hidden behind that bright backlight.”

The desire for this Object to be a one-trick pony may have narrowed people's vision.

With her game system directly linked to the Manhattan 000, Melly moved the large ring her butt sank inside of to carry her alongside Central Park and the giant opening within. Uptown, Upper East Side, Madison Avenue. This area had a high density of floral security cameras and every bag or piece of children's clothing sold there was as expensive as a piece of art. The brown girl must have been somehow stimulated by this luxurious atmosphere because she desperately pursed her lips and trembled within her two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper. With Central Park rising up with rows of buildings on either side, there was no sunlight. There was a pond and a museum clinging to the side of that "wall", so it had to look like a surreal outdoor art exhibit.

Either she wanted to fiddle with something or she just liked how it felt in her hands because Melly rubbed her thumbs against the analog sticks on either side of the game system.

"Right, right. That's right, Wraith. I wanted to ask you something since you've been all over the world. 948. Do you know a journalist named Royce?"

"What about them?"

"095. I've collected them."

"...You're attacking the press now? That is the lowest form of information warfare."

"The press...! Yes, yes, that has such a wonderful ring to it. 707. It has such a formally dangerous sound so different from having your secrets revealed on the internet. Eh heh heh heh heh."

She must have been leaving the calculations to the extraordinary Object because the ring hopped up lightly along with the paper surgical gown girl inside. Wraith watched with cold eyes.

It did not matter that the AI network, that's hardware could be located anywhere, was functioning properly if its observer was broken.

Wraith recalled the method of breaking the Martini Series that Piranirie had mentioned. Melly was an old acquaintance, but she felt an eerie pressure from

the very existence of the Ragnarok Script that had driven Piranirie mad with active self-denial. If Wraith was asked if she could place her full trust in this girl, she would have difficulty nodding.

After all, she could not even trust herself.

“Anyway, I didn’t mean to do this. He had the misfortune of being on the seam when Central Park opened. 779. To be blunt, he fell down into the classified zone...the main cannon’s storage space. He landed on a catwalk, so it wasn’t a long drop, though.”

“...”

Seeing Wraith’s indescribably uncertain expression, Melly gently sighed in just her two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper. As if to say she had felt the exact same way. After breathing a heated breath on her game screen, she lightly rubbed the screen on the oil paper covering her chest and showed Wraith the screen of that game system that was like the evolved form of a tablet.

“This is the bearded man in question. 153. To be honest, he’s not my type. Although having your secrets revealed by someone who isn’t your type might be a decent situation...”

“Keep this up and I really will hate you.”

The screen seemed to display a video file.

An ordinary middle-aged man was looking around anxiously. He looked like the kind of person who cared for his family so much he forgot to look after his own life. He probably worked hard, paid his taxes, used up his bonus and paid leave over the holidays prepared by the higher ups, and got caught in traffic.

“Please let me contact my family. I beg you. I am a journalist, so I understand how your rules work to an extent. I will keep your secrets. I will not tell anyone about this. You can monitor my every move if you wish. Just let me tell that girl that I am safe. This isn’t like those online journalists who pursued the legends banned by the Faith Organization. None of this is necessary here. Please, meeting in Central Park was that girl’s idea. If I remain missing, she might blame herself. Since I am perfectly safe, there is no reason for her to harm herself like

that, is there? Just let me fulfill my duty as her father.”

Of course, those Information Alliance geniuses were not emotional enough fools to judge someone based on their appearance alone. Detailed data on his breathing, pulse, perspiration, eye movement, and facial muscle movement was provided with the footage.

After reading the data, Wraith could only respond with a quiet look.

“...Well, this is troubling. He’s nothing more than a good person. Even if this is a stressful situation, 220 is high for the top blood pressure number. I’m worried about his bad cholesterol.”

They also looked through his past educational and employment history, his bank account data, his search history, his online purchase history, and his statements on social media and message boards, but it all came up clean. In fact, it was so clean that they wondered if this was an alternate account for living a double life.

“This was bad luck for everyone involved. If he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing and I had even one reason to abandon him, I was planning to detain him or shoot him, but I have to save such an honest person. 600. I’m going to release him and send him to one of the shelters. The military exists to protect the people, after all.”

The brown girl breathed a heavy sigh as she explained that.

...At first glance, she seemed to be a normal and sensible person (if you ignored certain unusual proclivities), but she was the Martini in charge of New York’s defense as well as the Pilot Elite. That meant she was the culprit who had fired the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon on an Information Alliance maintenance fleet. There was also the Ragnarok Script. Active self-denial could be steering her full speed away from the safe choice. Making a hasty decision would be dangerous.

During the fight against Piranirie, it was revealed that Capulet could not “see” New York because its residents hated the surveillance cameras and email spying. The AI itself was pure, but if the Martini Series meant to check on it had gone insane, there was a fear that Capulet would lose its accuracy.

Wraith rationally observed the girl and hid her rational mindset with an indifferent smile.

“Is there some kind of problem with postponing a decision on this mere evacuee?”

“It looks like he’s going to die of an ulcer or helicobacter pylori before I got around to it. But if you don’t know him, I guess we’ll have to rely on the family member Mr. Royce keeps talking about. 657.”

“His daughter, huh? Is she in Manhattan?”

“100. Yes, fortunately for his stress levels. And this might surprise you. Okay? To use an Island Nation idiom, it’s like a kite giving birth to a hawk.”

“?”

“She’s the Pilot Elite of the Second Generation Gatling 033. 710.”

“...The Juliet’s?”

Wraith’s voice dropped in tone.

Melly nodded and narrowed her eyes with her butt inside the large ring.

“The one that shared Capulet’s development history. They were working on an AI network from a different angle than our Martini Series. This man is an indisputably good person and he’s connected to a VIP. I have no excuse to continue holding him in protective custody. 890. Even if this was an unfortunate accident, it will cause a lot of trouble.”

Part 12

“...Ohh?”

Part 13

The Underground Railroad seemed to weave through the gaps in Manhattan's structure, but it only went so far.

Heivia Winchell groaned next to a metal shutter thick enough to be a submarine door.

"This is the worst, dammit. Couldn't I go jerk off, take a nap, and wake up to find peace has come to the world?"

Silver-haired, brown-skinned Lendy Farolito responded with no movement of her emotions.

"If one of the four major powers is completely broken, the entire planet will plummet into an uncontrollable war. You need to give up on the idea of being able to escape."

A mixture of several deep metallic noises approached. While pressed up against the wall next to the door, Heivia and Myonri looked puzzled and turned toward the source of the noise just in time to see the approach of a nice body with G-cups and long hair worn in gorgeous ringlet curls.



It was the Information Alliance Pilot Elite and top idol. However...

“She’s huge. Isn’t she just way, way too big!? Sh-she’s gotta be like four meters or something! She could probably make a slam dunk while just standing there!!”

“Oh ho ho. This is technically classified as a powered suit.”

“Powered...”

Myonri was shocked into silence, so silver-haired, brown-skinned Lendy explained.

“It is an impractical concept machine that was displayed at an Information Alliance robot show. There is almost no good use for it, but we receive maintenance and inspection funding just by having it sleeping in storage, so it is a profitable treasure for our unit.”

Its history involved some unbelievable grownup issues.

“Wh-what are those huge things it’s holding like double handguns?” asked Myonri. “They look more like exposed lab equipment than weapons.”

“Those are rapid-fire beam cannons meant to be carried by truck and fixed to a turret. They were originally meant for assassinations on the surface or in the air. I believe they were developed to vaporize VIP planes and armored cars that are using routes that avoid the Object and all its laser beams. Although they are apparently quite underpowered as they have no reactor to power them.”

“Hyehh. Is it supposed to be mimicking the Rush?”

“What do the weapons matter?” complained Heivia. “That huge thing could break through a tank’s hatch with nothing more than its fists...”

The sense of scale was way off, but the proportions were exactly those of the human G-cup idol. Whatever the actual bust size was, when you looked at it proportionally, the G-cups were still G-cups! And perhaps due to how it was maintained, it gave off a floral scent similar to shampoo or conditioner. It seemed idols really did smell of soap rather than perfume.

And when the 4m G-cups stood next to Heivia’s less than 2 meters, he could not help but have a low angle. He slapped his hand against the fake butt.

“Oh, ohh. Now this is a weird feeling. The fact that it’s soft is actually creepy. I feel a pressure coming from this ass. I’m afraid I’ll be buried alive...”

“The first time I can write off as an accident, but the second time will be considered intentional and I will kick. Oh ho ho. Just like a thoroughbred.”

This was no time to be focused on an enemy idol. He could not stop his balls from shriveling up in fear. After all, this would be more than an impact from dual-wielded steel construction beams. Those cutting-edge weapons were meant to be carried by truck and fixed to the ground with stakes, yet she was holding one in each hand. If that solid grip grabbed his balls, it would be the end of the world.

Myonri was also overwhelmed by rapid-fire beam cannons that looked like reinforced glass lab equipment forcibly covered with composite armor.

“Th-those aren’t exactly disguised. I thought you had to hide your actions from the main Information Alliance group here.”

“The best place to hide a tree is a forest. Melly’s side is skilled at gathering information, so we just have to use that against them. Look at this. Glance.”

“Made in...Nau Yoke?”

“That’s not even close to spelled right. And it has a price tag for \$199.99! There’s no way truck-loaded weapons would be that cheap! What, are they like a used car that’s cursed to kill each of its owners in an accident!?”

No one would think those were real now. Heivia had trouble believing the way the Information Alliance did things.

“I-I guess it’s all about making them realistic, huh? Well, I don’t care. Just give me some Information Alliance VR goggles. I’ll shut myself in my own world and stroke my you-know-what, so go save the world without me.”

Whatever the case, if he hopped in a rowboat and left Manhattan, he would be vaporized by one of countless cannons the instant he was far enough away. Heivia, Myonri, and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had to solve the Manhattan problem if they were to return alive.

“I don’t know or care what hand signs and footwork the Information Alliance

uses. We'll do things our own way, so try not to trip us up."

"As long as you act as a shield or a diversion, I do not particularly care."

"Okay, I get it. You can shut up now, plump commander. C'mon, let's get onboard, Myonri."

They could not seem to work together in the slightest.

Without even a basic three-count, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance began moving independently.

The 30m, 12ton yellow school bus loaded with the potatoes broke through the thick metal shutter like it was wet paper.

The bright sunlight briefly blinded Heivia and the others as it stabbed into their darkness-adjusted eyes.

They were in Midtown West, Midtown.

"Oh, geez. Here we are on Broadway!!"

"I wish we could've seen it at night."

Electronic signs and giant monitors surrounded a road as large as a runway. World-class theatres lined either side of the street. Needless to say, this was the pinnacle of the theatrical and film world. The flower or trumpet-like security cameras had detected their presence. Many eyes gathered on them. Heivia felt a definite pressure, like the air had solidified. Tires screeched as the giant vehicles were forced around. The three school busses knocked the poor civilian cars out of the way lightly enough to not kill anyone and finally arrived on Manhattan's largest main street.

Lendy whispered quietly aboard the same large vehicle.

"We've been spotted."

"Those Bullmites are looking pretty adorable now. We're the big-ass mama who protects the kids on the way home from school!!"

Several boulder-like masses sat in the middle of the intersection. They were the composite armor bulls sitting with their four legs folded up below them. Those serverless unmanned weapons would use flexible actions with just their

simple circuits. They would probably function as an immovable barrier in a head-on collision from a normal off-road vehicle, but the yellow school busses rode over them and crushed them instead of knocking them out of the way. Heivia's group briefly left gravity's grasp and passed through the intersection with a dreadful impact.

"Passing the Bullmites will increase the alert level. Keep an eye on the sky."

"Then it's about time we brought out the trick hidden up our sleeve. Let's go, Myonri!"

Just then, a giant shadow appeared overhead. What was it? The silhouette resembled a broad, double-edged sword and it seemed to be loaded with a rocket engine. It even opened something like a square umbrella to make sure it did not overshoot them.

It did not feel remotely real to the potatoes, so Lendy shouted in their place.

"That's a Smart Meteor. It's an unmanned urban aerial bombing aircraft! Watch out!!"

Did it too coordinate using on-site decisions like a bee or ant? Including visitors, Manhattan had 10 million people walking around, but it did not matter that they were at Times Square, the most densely populated area there. The belly of the broad double-edge sword body opened and a precision-guided bomb was released high in the sky. That bomb used GPS and the movements of its tail fins to achieve a margin of error of only 30cm.

A moment later, an explosive was used to slice open the yellow school bus's rear end from within. And like a sword being drawn from its scabbard, a smaller (but still large) truck slid out of the speeding school bus and onto the road.

The school bus was forcefully blown away and the flaming mass collapsed on its side and rolled away, but the large truck carrying the potatoes easily avoided the wreckage it had shed like a snake's skin.

"Self-driving scares the hell out of me! You can just do it all with a smartphone, can't you!?"

"It's a good thing Dorothea's plan using tanks was ended sooner rather than later."

By this time, were the people of Manhattan panicking?

Or did they think a movie was being filmed?

Heivia and the others followed Broadway to leave Midtown West and entered the Upper West Side directly alongside Central Park.

They wanted to say something about the colossal cannon, but they did not have the time with their life being targeted from above in real time.

“The next one is coming.”

“Myonri! The next layer! These New Yorkers are connoisseurs, so a garter belt won’t be enough to turn them on!!”

The large truck had no one in the driver’s seat and the door on the back burst open to allow several bulletproof black off-road vehicles out. With each decoy, they were using up their extra lives and their armor was growing thinner, but it also made them lighter and nimbler.

They were in the nest. Even without a server, these unmanned weapons could coordinate using the social structure of ants or bees, so trying to eliminate the threat by destroying every single one would be a never-ending task.

They had to think up a way to continue forward without defeating them.

“The next is the last one!”

“The fun really begins once we’re buck naked.”

The luggage-loading door sprang up on the back of their bulletproof off-road vehicle and Heivia and Myonri burst out onto the road riding light off-road motorcycles.

This time, they had no armor whatsoever.

The wind seemed to slice into their flesh.

But it was also true that development of self-driving motorcycles was taking longer than with cars. That eliminated the worry of having them hijacked by a surprise cyber-attack.

“What?” asked Heivia. “There’s something other than the Bullmites. What’s

that collapsible umbrella monster thing!?”

“That interpretation is not entirely wrong,” said Lendy over the radio. “It is a Gunner Bat. When folded up, it is no larger than a relay baton and it is an offshoot of portable grenade launcher design. When you throw it, the wings automatically open, it flies autonomously, and an external terminal is used to guide it over the enemy’s head where it can fire up to three explosives when instructed. Its accuracy is below average, but it can scatter more generalized damage when loaded with white phosphorous grenades or the like. It is a support weapon that uses a quantity over quality philosophy to force enemy soldiers out from behind cover with explosions and smoke.”

Heivia remembered the self-rolling grenades that Wraith had used on the Olympia Dome. Even without a server, their simple circuits could take the optimal action by mimicking the movements of insects. These were Information Alliance unmanned weapons. That electronic equipment filled Heivia with self-pity for using those pineapple-shaped explosives that required him to pull the pin and throw it like a rock. ...On the other hand, these weapons would probably be vulnerable to an EMP or microwave attack.

“White phosphorous in a densely-populated area? What is wrong with them? Nothing about that makes me happy. ...And what is that giant top!?”

“That is a Multi-Gyro. It is a reconnaissance drone that can travel through the air or on the ground. It has no obvious weapons, but it is loaded with a stun bomb. Get within 3 meters of it and it will scatter an 800,000-volt current. Since it does not need to access a server, it can do so without any adverse effects on itself. Not only is it harmful to human bodies, but it could easily cause a vehicle’s electronics to malfunction.”

Heivia felt his balls shriveling up as he had it calmly explained to him. And before any of those issues, if he passed out while straddling a motorcycle, he would be killed instantly.

The unmanned weapon had no tires or treads, but it still attempted to tackle the off-road motorcycle with nothing more than top-like spinning. Heivia focused on that while also desperately trying to think.

Even if Manhattan was an extraordinarily large Object, it was still only one

borough of the giant city of New York. The distance from Times Square, where they exited the Underground Railroad, to Columbia University was about 10 kilometers at most. While ignoring all traffic laws and flooring it, they could travel that distance in less than 5 minutes.

“Columbia University is being used to house civilians, so it has been designated a noncombat area,” said Lendy over the radio. “Reaching our destination ASAP should be the safest plan.”

“More importantly, what happened with that Oh Ho Ho!? Did you develop a bike big enough for that fat suit and its huge ass!?”

“It is not fat, nor does it have a huge ass! Ho...ho ho...oh ho ho ho ho ho!! You need to look at the overall proportions. It has the perfect golden ratio, does it not!?”

“Besides, you are not authorized for that information,” added Lendy. “It can be easy to forget, but that girl’s very presence is a secret our unit must protect.”

By the time they heard Oh Ho Ho’s shouting and Lendy Farolito’s calm voice over their earpieces, Heivia, Myonri, and the others on the off-road motorcycles had entered the university campus.

Heivia clenched his teeth when a bomb fell just barely outside the campus. Those serverless simple circuits had done it.

“Ochre, Nex...!!”

“Keep your balance! Do you want to fall over and end up as mincemeat!?”

Myonri shouted directly at him while driving right alongside him. She had to have noticed the allies behind them had been blown away, but they could not use recovery magic that brought back the dead.

The Smart Meteor had been opening its square umbrella to adjust its speed and keep its broad double-edged sword shape overhead at all times, but it veered away so as not to enter the university campus. Heivia saw that as he rode his off-road motorcycle full-speed along the well-maintained lawn, but...

“!?”

He felt a sudden impact.

His off-road motorcycle's front wheel was crushed like a cake dropped on the ground.

(A Bullmite...!?)

He did not have time to gasp.

He was thrown into the air, so he curled up and rolled across the lawn to reduce the impact. Meanwhile, the mass of composite armor planted its four legs on the lawn to accurately target him once more. The serverless bull used just its simple circuits to teach itself, so it began running in order to smash that soft human body.

Unmanned weapons did not fear death.

He could fire hundreds of 9mm bullets straight at it, but he would not stop it.

“!?”

Without bothering to get up, Heivia aimed his submachinegun (that he had swiped from a Manhattan resident). It was mostly just a reflex, like covering your face when a ball was thrown at it. His rational mind was screaming that firing would be useless.

He had to rethink this.

With all the unmanned weapons, this battle's rules were different.

(Throw out the fundamentals. Work your mind to survive. Preserving your gun and ammo is useless if you're turned to mincemeat. What would that bastard do at times like this?)

“Nwohhhhhhhhh!!”

He shook that from his mind with a bizarre yell.

As the mass of composite armor approached, he removed the submachine gun, grabbed the shoulder strap, and swung it like a caveman. He restrained his fear, stared straight ahead, and threw his precious gun toward the Bullmite's forelegs like a cowboy's lasso. This was only an option if he threw out the fundamental idea that a soldier's gun was their lifeline on the battlefield.

The bulls used in bullfighting had outstanding speed and weight, but unlike an

elegant horse, they lacked the strength to clear hurdles and other obstacles. The Bullmite could not avoid the submachinegun that spun at higher than knee height. It was over quickly once the firearm struck the forelegs.

The sling belt tangled around the mechanical legs and the heavy mass sank forward like a table with one of its four legs broken.

Its own speed and weight worked against it and it was incapacitated in no time at all. It plowed toward Heivia with the force of a rolling boulder.

“Watch out!!”

The delinquent soldier still could not get up, but he somehow managed to dodge by rolling to the side. If the Bullmite had all fours legs on the ground, it would have made an adjustment even a millimeter before contact to pursue him.

(This is awful. I feel like I’m being forced to kiss the contents of my own balled-up tissue...)

Had he done it?

It was just like a traffic accident. Humans were not strong enough to destroy a gigantic truck, but if they caused an accident, the truck would reduce itself to a mangled mess. He had lost his precious submachinegun, so he hoped for that level of results. However...

“...Damn,” he groaned.

A straight line had been gouged into the lawn, but the mass of composite armor stood back up at the end of it. The four mechanical legs stood firm on the ground in order to crush that inefficient mass of muscle.

There was really nothing he could do this time.

(What do I do!? Do I use my boot laces next!? Or remove my belt and swing my prized you-know-what around!?)

But just then, something changed.

With a sizzling sound like water on a hot grill, a giant, half-melted top flew in from elsewhere. It seemed to be a Multi-Gyro falling apart in midair. The stun bomb inside it must have malfunctioned because it scattered an 800,000-volt

current that fried the Bullmite's electronics. It no longer mattered that it was a serverless machine that ran on the insect colony theory.

“Owaaaaah!?”

It was more like a rapid series of narrow lights than a single stream of water from a fire truck. The destroyed target had fist-sized chunks torn from its armor, the number of holes grew, and the entire thing melted and was blown away in no time. It was an even worse version of Swiss cheese. Heivia wanted to avoid dying like that at all costs.

The attacks were rapid-fire beams.

Unlike the lasers which had become synonymous with anti-air weaponry, these were visible, but that actually helped them stimulate fear. Heivia doubted this was simply meant as assistance. When the orange spray of melted armor passed right by his face, he frantically got down.

The 4-meter nice body that was “made in Nau Yoke” had arrived later than the off-road motorcycles. The boobs jiggled perfectly in sync with its pace, so it was clearly a crystallization of the designer's blood and tears.

“Oh ho ho. Make sure to thank your lucky stars and the goddess of victory.”

Heivia sounded annoyed as he looked at those weapons that looked like reinforced glass lab equipment forcibly covered with armor.

“A powered suit with prototype assassination beam weapons? It always comes down to tech, doesn't it?”

“Of course it does. What do you think war is?”

He had only survived by working up a sweat and rolling through the mud, but she had cleaned it all up by wielding those giant rapid-fire beam cannons like an action star with dual pistols. And with her extra-large boobs jiggling all the while. It was clear she lived in a different world since she could take her time and arrive late while the unmanned weapons targeted her from the air in the Manhattan streets.

Myonri made a shocked comment after making a U-turn and returning on her off-road motorcycle despite the danger. ...Except she may not have been

motivated by the power of friendship. She may have simply been afraid of being hit by a stray shot of that futuristic beam weapon that was scattering its shots chaotically around.

“I thought Columbia University’s campus was a noncombat area!”

The ubiquitous floral security cameras remained silent. They would not disprove false charges and they ignored their own side’s rule violations, so their quality could not have been worse. Were they only good for peeping on highly-educated college girls?

“No, wait. I recognize these scratches,” groaned Heivia as he looked at the Bullmite that had flipped over like a dead bug. “This is one of the ones that rushed at us in Chinatown. These are definitely the same scratches. You can’t fool my clever eyes.”

The 4-meter ringlet curls girl tilted her head while firing her rapid-fire beam cannons at the Bullmites and Multi-Gyros that attempted to approach. Those dual cannons were devastating in an open area with no hills.

“I am not sure what you mean.”

“That can happen, can it? ...Getting the Information Alliance to admit that feels like victory to me.”

The Chinatown in Downtown was the opposite direction from Columbia University in Uptown. Since Manhattan was full of these unmanned weapons, it was not logical for the same one to have come all this way.

That meant it was possible someone had brought it here.

That meant the Martini who was suspected of falling into active self-denial just like Piranirie. That brown girl with her butt inside a large swim ring.

And...

“Myonri. And the idol too. Keep your fingers on the trigger.”

“Eh?”

In place of his ruined submachinegun, Heivia reached for his hip and drew a handgun capable of firing the same bullets. Wealthy Manhattan was overrun with such things.

He would not have trouble killing someone.

“She’s coming. Wraith Martini Vermouthspray is coming!!”

Part 14

“Frank. Prepare for battle.”

In a second floor hallway of Columbia University’s main building, a black-uniformed blonde girl gave that command. Wraith Martini Vermouthspray’s eyes were fixed on the yard visible out the window.

“Heh heh. Eh heh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh. I’m inside a world-renowned Ivy League school in clothing that could be torn with the slightest tug. How☆thrilling!! 008, 774, 868, 229! Tag it, tag it, tag it some more!! The cold, rejecting atmosphere of the school hallway is so good. Ah ha, ah ha ha. I’m going crazy. Completely crazy. The world is such an amazing place...!!”

“Melly, can I just shoot you?”

“Uwebh, cough, cough!! 808. Sorry, I’ll take this seriously.”

She must have been focused on the footage from the ubiquitous floral security cameras because the brown girl with her butt inside a large swim ring made from the same material as a special operations rubber boat stared at her game system and began folding up her arms and legs that she had spread out. The approach of outsiders may have brought out her shy side.

“438. To get back on topic, Wraith, I’ve detected the attack, but I have a few questions. You should be cautious.”

“Not what I expected to hear from New York’s defense commander.”

Did Wraith sound so threatening because she suspected she herself was being affected by the Ragnarok Script? Looking at oneself was not easy. Melly, meanwhile, had folded up her limbs like a chrysalis or fetus to enter her serious mode (even if that was only skin deep).

She must have been worried about it overheating because she waved the thin game system like a fan.

“Even with everything I’ve seen here, it still doesn’t add up. I doubt the isolated Legitimacy Kingdom remnant could do all this on their own. 319. We should assume some of our own people are supporting them.”

“So they have equipment and our internal information, huh?”

“050. Also, I can’t figure out why they would target Columbia University. There have to have been better candidates if they wanted to damage the Manhattan 000 as the world’s largest Object. This place is being used as a shelter for civilians because there was nothing of value here. Are they directly targeting me? Or do you have another idea, Wraith?”

“Nope.” Wraith waved her hand dismissively and breathed an exasperated sigh. “But I am aware they would want to kill me if they had a chance. A dangerous and earnest enemy has given up on safely remaining hidden and has made it this far while so many unmanned weapons pursue them. Since they’re actively putting their lives at risk, this has to be more than a whim or just to show off. I doubt a peaceful conversation would get through to them.”

“I see. 591.”

With her limbs folded up and the game system held between her soft-looking brown thighs, Melly lightly swung one of the remote-style controllers. A Bullmite responded to the magic wand by walking up alongside Wraith. Removing the composite armor around its belly revealed a full supply of weapons and ammunition for human use.

Wraith frowned.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Wraith, you will put together whatever you need all on your own. This is a school with plenty of workshops, so it should be much better suited to research projects than a home garage. 171. I’ll supply the weapons, so it would be great if you could settle this with a sensible amount of equipment. And I mean that from a risk simulation standpoint as well. Okay?”

“That would help a lot, but if something happens, say I stole the weapons.”

“Sorry, but I’m not that shameless, Wraith. 903.”

The black-uniformed girl snapped her fingers and the young man stepped forward and began checking through the mountain of weapons and ammo like a guard dog given permission to eat.

“Melly, what will you do?”

“Are you asking me to deal with a gun’s recoil after what happened to my spine? 749. As usual, I will leave the annoying fighting to the unmanned weapons.”

“I doubt that will work,” declared Wraith while grabbing a small self-defense handgun. “Not against this enemy.”

Part 15

There were more and more sizzling sounds like water on a hot grill.

They were of course coming from the 4m idol piloted by the Information Alliance's Oh Ho Ho. Those bizarre cannons looked like reinforced glass lab equipment with composite armor forcibly added on top. Those giant rapid-fire beam cannons were meant to be carried by truck and fixed to the ground with metal stakes, but she was holding and swinging them around with machine arms. The Bullmites were built to deflect a normal(?) assault rifle bullet, but they could not "hunt" as intended when their opponent was a bipedal powered suit. The Multi-Gyros, those giant tops filled with 800,000 volts of electricity, were also having little luck.

More and more fist-sized holes were torn into the unmanned weapons' armor and they were soon melted like sugar sculptures and blown away.

The university had a lot of straight hallways and the Bullmites could only just barely fit their large armored forms around the corners. It was not conducive to nimble movements that used excellent footwork to approach while moving from cover to cover. They could not avoid the rapid-fire light coming from the two cannons.

"As usual, the star of the battle is the Elite. Oh ho ho!"

"More importantly, watch your head. Seeing a fancy Nau Yoke idol's head smashing through the ceiling and fluorescent lights is one hell of a visual!"

This seemed to be the logic of a Pilot Elite born in the age of Objects.

The powered suit was unstoppable while tilting its head at a diagonal angle but still scraping its ringlet curl head against the low ceiling. Instead of individual ingenuity, it was direct firepower backed by technology and resources that eliminated the threat. Without even using cover, she ruled the battlefield with the simple idea that a strong offense was the greatest defense.

“I can’t believe they would gather all the civilians in one place and then send their unmanned weapons there...”

“Give them enough time and those monsters will decide to use them as hostages. Let’s end this before any bored wives are tied to one of those rodeo machines made of composite armor.”

“? You are being awfully malicious this time. Oh ho ho. Has the Legitimacy Kingdom been teaching you to feel more hostile?”

That said, Heivia’s group had to think about more than just the fight against the Martinis. Their top priority was getting Oh Ho Ho’s father, Royce, out of Columbia University.

Unlike a middle or high school, universities gave the students a lot more freedom, but that increased the risk to them. Some of the faded posters on the bulletin boards were asking for information on missing people. That included a journalism club that had gone missing after leaving for a battlefield country (in the name of gathering materials, but who knows what they were thinking).

“Once we’re done with this, you really will work your fingers to stop the Manhattan and Capulet, won’t you!?”

“Oh ho ho. ...I would really rather do that right away, but the doctors and counselors are all stopping me.”

“Only a sage living deep in the mountains can control their own heart.”

“I really wish all of you would stop treating this perfect international idol like she has a father complex.”

“Wait, did you just add another trait in there? Idol, Elite, busty, father complex...how many scoops of ice cream are on this cone?”

It seemed idols needed to be multi-talented in this age.

They checked inside a nearby classroom and saw a few frightened students with their hands in the air. The shelters for the gathered civilians were apparently in the larger facilities like lecture halls and gyms.

“...We really should have gone there right away. Oh ho ho.”

“And where exactly is ‘there’? Will we have to check each one in turn?”

That was easy enough to say, but Columbia University had several dozen schools from both the liberal arts and the sciences, so it was an enormous educational organization with more than 20,000 teachers and students. Even a low estimate for the number of school buildings and related facilities on campus could not be counted on your fingers. Oh Ho Ho's rapid-fire beam cannons were quite effective, but they could not get overly optimistic. For one thing, she was wielding prototype assassination weapons and those large-caliber, high-power cannons were poorly suited for close ranges. And just like the Bullmites, the powered suit could not move freely inside the complex indoor environment.

If the Bullmites used the coordination of their simple circuits to all jump out at once, the entire situation could be turned on its head. It would be very bad if the unmanned weapons used their lack of a life to carry an anti-tank chemical warhead with them. Whatever the case, they wanted to avoid wandering around if it could be avoided.

Heivia thought for a bit.

"First, let's head to the cafeteria. With this many civilians here, they'll have to do something about the food. If there's a memo in the kitchen listing where they're sending all the food, we won't have to wander this educational labyrinth without any kind of hint."

"Heivia, you do tend to handle everything perfectly as long as an Object doesn't show up," said Myonri.

"Oh ho ho. In other words, he is useless in this age of Objects."

"Just so you know, I'm going to remember what you say here!" shouted Heivia, but they easily ignored him.

Now that they had a plan, they walked across a pathway and ran into some masses of composite armor as soon as they entered a different school building. It was those Bullmites, but while scraping her tilted head against the ceiling panels and wielding her rapid-fire beam cannons like dual pistols, the 4m ringlet curls came to a stop.

They formed two perfect rows.

It was not that they had been stopped by congestion. This formation was clearly intentional. And then they made a coordinated charge like a train.

“Why you-...!!”

Oh Ho Ho quickly fired her two rapid-fire beam cannons while her extra-large boobs jiggled, but the brilliant beams of light only hit the leading pair. The amount of fist-sized melted holes grew and those shields crumbled like a melted sugar sculpture, but the next pair of identical Bullmites now took the lead. Then the process repeated. If just one of the unmanned weapons reached the powered suit before they were all turned to Swiss cheese by the horizontal hail of beams, they would win.

Unmanned weapons did not fear death.

The Bullmites were made to carry equipment or act as barricades, so they did not hesitate to use themselves as shields. Those serverless yet coordinated monsters trampled their allies’ remains and did not hesitate to take the lead even when they knew they would be trampled next.

“Crap, crap, crap!!”

“Wh-what do we do now!? If those futuristic beam weapons don’t work, our shotguns and handguns aren’t going to help at all!”

And lamenting their situation would not help improve it.

They could not expect mercy or pangs of conscience from unmanned weapons.

“Dammit!!”

Heivia fired handgun bullets into the lockers lining one wall of the hallway to break the locks. Changes of clothing, cellphones, video disks, and other student property spilled out across the floor.

“It doesn’t matter what, just blow everything to pieces, Myonri!!”

A shotgun blasted toward the floor nearby. Several small pieces of shot flew out and instantly turned the personal possessions to scrap. They were forcibly torn to pieces and flew up into the air as small fragments.

Wildly moving metal fragments could interfere with EM and IR

communications.

Compared to her Object, the powered suit's thick armor must not have been enough to keep out the fear. Oh Ho Ho crouched down as the threat approached, so the sizzling sound of the rapid-fire beam cannons ended. But a different loud noise erupted instead. The Bullmites had been accurately coordinating their movements to act as a single whole, but now they began running into each other like a multi-car pileup.

Myonri asked a hesitant question while watching the Bullmites self-destruct thanks to her efforts.

"Wh-what happened?"

"They weren't using their usual submarine mode, right? To move so smoothly without causing any congestion, they had to be coordinating the distance between them using IR or radar. Interfering with that using chaff naturally caused a major accident. C'mon, Oh Ho Ho! How long are you gonna lie there!? It's over!!"

"M-mghh... How could I let you see me like that?"

With shaky movements, the 4m killer weapon got up from its maiden-like crouching position. With a dull noise, her large head shattered a fluorescent light.

"One little prank caused all this? It may have been too soon for these toys to be fully automated. Oh ho ho."

"There's a prank where people shine a laser pointer in a soccer player or airplane pilot's eyes, right? What do you think would happen if you shined it into a vehicle lens from a walkway over the highway? I feel like all the arguments about these things are only focused on the plusses. It's scary."

Normal knives and bullets would not have their expected effect on unmanned weapons that were never alive to begin with. You needed to use a separate logic that only applied to them: magnetism, salt water, acid, high temperatures, rust, an insect infestation, *etc.*

If the Bullmites were coordinating over the radio, they would also notice when the transmissions ended. Thus, they could not relax just because they had

wiped out the enemy here. Heivia's group hurried on to the cafeteria before reinforcements arrived.

They wanted to keep things quiet, but a loud rumbling burst out. Heivia and Myonri ducked down and saw that the 4m Oh Ho Ho had hit her forehead like a klutz.

"Goh?"

"Be careful when walking through doorways! You're already scraping your head on the ceiling!"

There was a giant silver refrigerator in the kitchen and the door was so covered in memos that they had no idea what its original color was.

"Here it is, here it is," said Myonri. "There are a lot of delivery records for gyms 1 through 3. They're all north of here."

"Only three?" asked Heivia. "I thought they were gathering people from all over the city here."

"These gyms are huge facilities used for international basketball and hockey tournaments. Each one can hold tens of thousands of people."

...That meant it would be difficult to locate an individual in the crowd even if they did figure out which location he was in, but they had to think of this as a step forward.

"Father..."

"Hey, old man pandering idol. If you have time to give dreams to all those wrinkly people, then get to work."

"C-could you not falsely accuse my father of being old and wrinkly!?"

"Aren't you forgetting to deny the most important part?" asked Myonri. "Weren't you claiming you didn't have a father complex!?"

While they argued, something rolled in through the kitchen's entrance. The cylinder was about the size of a hair spray can. It was a grenade with the pin and safety lever removed.

"Wait!"

They did not have time to question it.

The kitchen was immediately blown away.

Part 16

Heivia and the others were not the only ones hit by the blast and shockwave.

Wraith's group had used the building blueprint and the floral security cameras to make the attack, but they grimaced and held their ears as small pieces of wall materials fell on their heads.

"Frank! I said to use a nonlethal flashbang!"

"Don't blame him, Wraith. Flashbangs have had the harmful effects of their explosions reduced as much as possible, but the container still ruptures. They aren't as safe as they appear in movies and dramas. 110. And did you forget that using one in a kitchen runs the risk of damaging the gas pipe?"

Part 17

Despite the fierce gas explosion so nearby, Heivia's group was lucky in a few ways.

First, the blast had not been made more harmful with small metal balls like it would have been with a grenade or mine designed for military use.

Second, they had a 4m powered suit that would not budge even if an anti-personnel grenade detonated right in front of it.

Thus, the giant charming idol only had to lean over Heivia and Myonri to provide them with some makeshift shelter.

"Mghh. I was somewhat hopeful since the boobs actually jiggled, but this thing is heavy! Way too heavy!! How is this any different from a suspended ceiling trap!? It feels like I'm being suffocated with a thick plastic sheet filled with water!!"

"An idol and Elite is putting herself in harm's way to protect insignificant enemy soldiers, so I would expect a more emotional reaction. Oh ho ho."

An impact like that was apparently not even enough to cause any clothing damage on the 4m ringlet curl's special suit. She was entirely unscathed. While they argued, Oh Ho Ho raised her arm with a motion more mechanical than a machine's. She mercilessly aimed the right rapid-fire beam cannon toward the source of the grenade.

The swing of the arm was more important than the speed of the beam weapon itself.

Beyond the dust, a few figures fled from the sweeping series of short beams. When Oh Ho Ho prepared to supply the finishing blow, the rapid-fire beam cannon exploded in her hand since its barrel had been bent by the explosion. A capacitor had likely broken. The weapon had already looked like reinforced

glass lab equipment with armor attached, so Heivia and Myonri cowered down as they watched it happen.

“Curse that prototype! It’s like the urine sample bottle breaking in your hand!!”

“The hand is fragile because of all the joints, right?” said Myonri. “I’ve heard armor craftsmen can judge someone’s skill by checking there. But that thing’s hand wasn’t harmed at all when the weapon it was holding exploded...”

Oh Ho Ho provided no comment. She switched to the left cannon, but it did not respond. The 4m ringlet curls threw the remains of the unusable rapid-fire beam cannons. Those weapons were meant to be transported by truck and staked to the ground. They weighed more than the bar of a barbell, so throwing them made for more than enough of a weapon.

“Wraith...”

It may have been as inefficient as could be.

It may have only given away his position and condition to the enemy. Melly may have been the target they needed to suppress first and foremost.

But Heivia still raised his voice.

“Wraith Martini Vermouthspray!!”

“Hello, diligent avenger. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but did you really think I would just sit idly by while you caused such a scene? It does not matter how many people you have sent into this university. I will remove every last threat, one by one.”

The explosion had destroyed both the wall and door. There was too much dust in the air to see. The cover and line-of-fire diagram in their heads had fallen apart. Heivia could only think of one option.

“Move out front, Oh Ho Ho. You’re our shield!”

“Oh ho ho. I see you are no more intelligent than a drone. You’re the type that gets angry when AI takes over his job.”

Despite her storm of complaints, Oh Ho Ho understood the situation. Her large head scraped along the ceiling and her boobs jiggled in sync with her pace

as she took a step ahead of Heivia and Myonri and into the dust.

The deep sound of metal on metal immediately followed.

“Oh...?”

It was a blast into the center of her chest. The powered suit's back wobbled in front of Heivia and Myonri's eyes. She then fell onto her butt. The potatoes were nearly crushed by their ally's giant butt, but they just barely managed to escape to either side. She had been shot by something incredible. Myonri reached a hand toward the collapsed Oh Ho Ho on instinct, but Heivia was different. There was no helping Oh Ho Ho when she was covered by thick composite armor and pseudo-moisture-retaining silicone woven with cellulose nanofibers. If they did not first do something about whoever had fired on her, more shots would be fired and there would be no stopping the demolition.

But as Heivia ducked low and charged into the dust, someone charged in below his chin. It was a small figure with a black uniform and long blonde hair. She had rushed in just like he had.

“Wrai-...”

A heavy impact ran through his right temple before he could shout.

It was not caused by Wraith Martini Vermouthspray's right hand or left hand. The aide young man had acted separately from her and swung a giant anti-materiel rifle's stock into Heivia's temple. It was a giant weapon meant to drop any opponent in one hit, just like that monstrous magnum made from a modified grenade launcher. But the gun's recoil was so strong that it was hard to recover if he missed at close range. He knew that. He did, but relying on your insurance and then not killing the enemy in a single shot was always a mistake.

(Gh.)

Heivia's vision shook and he could not control his collapsing body. But at the same time, his arm moved like an independent life form. It grabbed the uniform covering Wraith's flat chest and used his shifting body weight to pull her down with him. After they rolled along the hallway floor, Heivia was on top. He pressed his handgun into the center of her chest and she pushed up his chin with a small self-defense handgun.

There was no fear in Heivia's face.

The only emotion there was anger.

"What's wrong, Wraith? Did your murderer's luck finally run out?"

"Are you going to shoot me?"

"Did you think you'd get a chance to negotiate, crazy girl? I've dreamed of this chance. I don't care about that active self-denial or whatever. I haven't forgotten what you did!!"

"But unfortunately, I'm much too busy to mess with you. Melly."

Heivia had perfectly taken the mounted position, but then his body flew straight up. This was not the same as the *Tomoe Nage* of the Asian Island Nation. A powerful impact struck his back and he had trouble breathing. Gravity seemed to lose its hold on him and his back slammed into the ceiling like he was being thrown around by turbulence on a passenger plane.

Even now, the brown girl named Melly Martini Extradry must have been worried about the potatoes' eyes on her because she folded up her arms like a fetus on top of her giant ring. She hid her mouth with her thin game system and half-tearfully trembled as she explained.

"667. D-did you forget? This is a giant Object, so I can do that by shaking the balanced city just a bit using the gyro controls."

"Dammit... Are you saying she's the Elite!?"

"The Manhattan 000 belongs to me. I am only lending it to Capulet."

Once he felt the tug of gravity return, Heivia immediately let go of his handgun. Comics and movies often depicted characters being slammed into the ground while holding a drawn sword or a gun with the safety off, but in reality, the force of the impact could easily have you stab or shoot yourself in the gut or thigh. Holding onto your weapon too tenaciously and accidentally committing *harakiri* was a stereotypical mistake given in military textbooks.

"...Gah!!"

He braced for impact, but the hallway ceiling was still more than three meters from the floor. The impact passing through his entire body was far greater than

from being tripped or thrown to the ground. He could not fully escape it, so he ended up groaning on the floor. Meanwhile, Wraith aimed her toy-like self-defense handgun at him from a few meters away.

“Check.” The little demon smiled. “You poor avenger who could not escape the standard framework. As usual, the likes of you begin to lose as soon as an Object is involved.”

“Damn...you.”

“Well, that’s what happens when Quenser isn’t around. Not that there wasn’t room for criticism in that combat engineer.”

“Damn you!!!!!!”

Heivia roared in anger and forced his body up even though he was still having trouble breathing.

A 9mm bullet stabbed mercilessly into the center of his chest.

After being shot from outside arm’s reach, the delinquent soldier collapsed backwards. His troubled breathing was disrupted even further and his consciousness flashed in and out. If not for the pocket containing his military flashlight and mobile device, his ribs would have broken and his organs would have been pierced.

But in addition to that, Heivia was not given time to scream.

“Keep your head down,” whispered Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

Something pierced through the wall. A shot was fired in through the window. The flying sparks looked like a handheld firework or a smoke grenade. It was an armor-piercing incendiary round that could damage military vehicles and unmanned weapons by shooting through the armor and then frying the internal circuitry or fuel tank.

If Wraith had not knocked Heivia out of the way with her self-defense handgun, it would have hit him in the side of the head.

“Didn’t I tell you I was too busy to mess with you? The threat we detected was that third party. To be honest, what you are up to is irrelevant.”

“What is the meaning of this...? And who is that!? How many people are going

to jump into the same bed at this crazy orgy!?”

“Don’t ask me. And for the Information Alliance, that may make this the most fearsome presence here.”

Part 18

“Tch.”

That person quietly clicked their tongue while moving their eye from the scope of a sniper rifle that used a lot of metal to increase the weight and thus the stability. Targeting people felt so much different from targeting things. That was why specialized snipers still existed in an age so full of machinery. No matter how much support a target received, they would still act on a whim.

...It seemed one of them had an anti-materiel weapon. If they deduced the sniper's location from the line of fire and a shootout began, the sniper would be overpowered. Not only would that weapon have a greater range, but its destructive power meant walls could not be trusted for cover.

This person had never been good at sniping. They had tried to increase their ability with the support of the embedded programs, but they doubted they could beat a specialist. It was the same reason professional cameramen existed in an age when anyone could snap a photo with autofocus and anti-blurring measures.

Challenging someone to a battle in their area of expertise would be the height of folly.

The opportunity for an upset only arrived once the other side was dragged down to your own field of expertise.

“Now, it's time to use this Hand Axe.”

Part 19

Irregular tremors suddenly ran through the entire school building.

They could not approach the windows with the possibility of a sniper, but as far as they could tell by peeking out from behind the pillars, several clouds of smoke were swelling out like cotton candy.

“Explosions?”

“It’s no use. You settle down too, Frank. In this age of cameras and sensors, I doubt they would try to hide behind a cloud of smoke with no chemical effects whatsoever. I bet that’s a diversion while they sneak in through a different entrance.”

Wraith looked annoyed, but her explanation seemed separated from her emotions.

“In the worst case, they might have even threatened some civilians into running through there, so don’t fire just because you see a shadow in the dust.”

“Tch. Hey, crazy girl, quit acting like you represent humanity’s good side.”

“What, you’re going to fight me even with all this going on? If you don’t want to be caught in a crossfire, I’d keep those thoughts to yourself, gentleman.”

Casually cruel Myonri nonchalantly aimed her weapon at Heivia to deter any rash actions and then she spoke in her usual small animal way.

“Wh-what are they trying to do...?”

“Who knows. 380.”

Myonri’s fearful question was bluntly answered by the brown girl who was still shrinking down on top of her ring. That answer carried a lot more weight coming from New York’s defense commander who had full use of the security systems. ...Of course, that was assuming her active self-denial had not gotten

the better of her and her word could be trusted. It was of course possible it was all a lie.

The black uniform girl shrugged while staying far enough away from the windows to avoid being shot.

“How are we supposed to know their goals when we don’t know who they are? But based on an offline search of the explosion’s acoustic signature, that was Hand Axe, a plastic explosive used by the Legitimacy Kingdom. So do you have any ideas?”

Heivia Winchell’s temples writhed irregular when he heard that.

A plastic explosive.

Hand Axe.

“...What?”

“The accuracy of such a simple search isn’t the best, but a chemical analysis looking for carbon, sulfur, and nitrogen in the dirt at the blast site would give us the answer. Although I don’t think we have enough time for that.”

“555. By the way.”

The brown girl in a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper cut in while cheerfully sitting with her butt inside the giant ring. Since her arms and legs were sticking out of the ring more than before, she had either grown accustomed to the stimulation or she was letting her guard down around them.

“From a strategic viewpoint, there is no reason at all to attack Columbia University if your goal is to take control of the Manhattan 000 as the world’s largest Object. 200. So I doubt they’re plotting to forcibly stop or hijack the Object. They might be after me since I’ve lent it to Capulet, but very few people know I’m also the Elite.”

“Then what else is there?”

“Sorry about answering your question with a question, but why are you here?”

Heivia intentionally maintained an expressionless face, but Myonri thoughtlessly glanced over at the 4m ringlet curl powered suit. The giant girl

spoke up while scraping her tilted head along the ceiling panels and fluorescent lights.

“...Father?”

“Hm. I can’t see who that is due to the silly powered suit, but I’m guessing it’s the model herself inside.” Wraith exhaled from her shapely nose. “Well, if you’d given up on negotiating with Melly, I guess it makes sense you’d go for Capulet since it’s the only other thing with power over the Manhattan 000. Given the development history and compatibility between Capulet and Juliet, it would also make sense you could hijack control of Manhattan using the Gatling 033’s Pilot Elite. She would be able to approach the AI Network from a different direction than the Martini Series. Given that, the attacker’s objective would be the Manhattan 000’s destruction. But instead of sinking it themselves, they’re trying to make it self-destruct by triggering a fight between the people on the inside...in other words, us.”

“No offense to you educated people who can achieve climax with nothing but your imagination, but isn’t that a bit of a leap? How could a little commotion between us cause this colossal weapon to blow up?”

“If that concept machine contains who I think it does, then I’m not overestimating this. The Juliet’s experimental results continue to strengthen Capulet in real time. That puts her much closer to it than mere monitors like us. She might be able to take on the thousands of Martinis singlehandedly. If the Gatling 033’s Juliet and its highly-compatible Pilot Elite attempt to bring down the Capulet AI Network using its vulnerabilities, they could be a threat to the Information Alliance as a whole. The network’s hardware and scope are a mystery because its advantage is limited to the online world. That prevents anyone from pulling the power cable to shut it down if they start to lose.” Wraith sounded somewhat exasperated. “Honestly, this is the problem with the age of Objects. The importance of specific individuals can vary so wildly. Aren’t you here to collect her father because your plan hinges on her individual performance?”

“ ... ”

It was the same as with Piranirie and Taratua. Whether or not the Martini

Series had a conscience or good sense, they could still do the calculations. Their character could not be trusted, but there would be no mistake in the actual analysis.

So it was best to base your thoughts on those assumptions.

What would cause the most chaos in this situation?

You only had to kill Oh Ho Ho's father in the shelter which was supposedly safe thanks to the Martini Series' management. It no longer mattered who the direct culprit was. Had the Martini Series made any mistakes? Had the Information Alliance as a whole wanted it? Once Oh Ho Ho was overwhelmed with anger, hatred, and suspicions, all of her skills could pass through the Information Alliance's Capulet and send the Manhattan out of control.

The most frightening thing was not the amount of firepower on hand or the number of people killed.

It was the same as the samurai who had once tried to open up the Island Nation or a certain world-famous musician. When a single blade or bullet bared its fangs against an innocent person, it would create an incalculable shock. This faceless person who had leaned out over the game board was trying to do that intentionally instead of by chance.

Individuals were supported by a large system, but they also determined the outcome of wars.

This reversal was built on the rules of an already twisted era.

"You're kidding, right? Then their target really is Oh Ho Ho's father!?"

"B-but they don't know where their target is in this giant university, right? Then we have time. We came to this cafeteria kitchen because we needed to work out the shelter locations from the food delivery routes."

Wraith rejected Myonri's words.

Had the crazy person gained a sharper mind by sacrificing someone like the crazy person she was? She had to have noticed that the timid girl's statement contained far too much wishful thinking.

"I wouldn't be so sure. If this lawless hunter's specialty is bombs, then they

can achieve their objective by indiscriminately blowing up each facility in turn. ...No, those diversion explosions may have been part of the plan. Not only did it get them safely inside the university, but they may have been observing how people reacted.”

“What do you mean?”

“The shelters will be the most densely packed areas. They would react most noticeably to a commotion. It’s like sending out sonar to locate the enemy. They just have to cause an explosion, note where the most voices came from, and then attack there. And that means we can’t relax.”

“Right. So the key is the screams of children. 497.”

Melly casually supplied that extra information with her butt inside the large ring and while wearing only a crimson surgical gown. She was much more relaxed than when she had first met the potatoes. She built interpersonal relationships quickly. It probably would not be long until she reached the ennui stage.

She breathed a warm breath on the flat game system’s screen and wiped it off with the paper over her chest.

“Universities are attended by a higher age group than middle or high schools, so if you ignore the few students that skipped several grades, there are almost no small children there. 119. So if 100 or 1000 children begin to cry and shout in response to the explosion, you know that has to be a shelter full of outsiders.”

Another deep explosion rang out and the floor of the university hallway shook.

Everyone there exchanged a glance.

“Ignoring this much evidence would be harder than finding proof of infidelity on your lover’s smartphone and pretending you never saw anything.”

“And even if we’re completely wrong, if that third party has plastic explosives and is headed to a shelter full of civilians, we have to stop them no matter what their reasons are.”

“Yes, that’s right. That’s exactly right.”

Heivia adjusted his grip on his handgun.

And he did not hesitate to aim it at Wraith.

“But this is a separate issue.”

Multiple dry gunshots rang out at close range.

There was so little hesitation in the pull of the trigger that Myonri was unable to react despite being right next to him.

And the aide young man stood in front of the black-uniformed girl with long blonde hair.

He had used his large anti-materiel rifle as a shield to forcibly restrain the cheap 9mm bullets.

“Did that satisfy you a little?”

Wraith did not bat an eye despite having her life targeted so suddenly.

Had the Martini Series always been like that? Or had she been modified by some external factor?

“We just lost one of our valuable weapons thanks to you. You’ll have to work to make up for it.”

Part 20

The university had a long history, so the complex and inscrutable building additions made over that time had naturally transformed it into a labyrinth. Gyms 1 through 3 were located relatively close to the edge of campus, but they were surrounded by artificial woods which made the main entrance hard to find. It was so bad that the second story walkways were more well-known.

The gyms were large enough to be used for international tournaments, including the opening and closing ceremonies. They were squares with sides measuring more than 50 meters, so they were more like small stadiums.

“Th-they must have 50,000 people in each one,” said Myonri. “That’s like a small town. Won’t it be hard for the attacker to find their target even if they are in here?”

“Melly. What do your precious cameras say?”

The swim ring girl wearing a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper answered the black-uniform girl’s question while holding her precious game system to her chest.

“There is one weakness to cameras that look down from above: extremely dense crowds. The people end up blocking the view of the other people. We really need to find a better countermeasure for molesters on the subway during rush hour.”

“It won’t be that tricky.”

For whatever reason, Wraith and Melly had stopped attacking Heivia’s group with the Bullmites, Multi-Gyros, and other unmanned weapons. That made travel much easier.

...Of course, whether they were always that way or they had been broken by active self-denial, could anything the Martini Series said or did be trusted? That

fundamental question remained.

“As you said, the gyms are crammed full of people. I doubt the blast would spread very well even if you did set off a bomb there. Even paper can act as a bulletproof vest if you have hundreds of layers. Human flesh is no different. Enough of it and it’ll stop an explosive blast. If this person wants to kill them all at once, they won’t place the bomb on the flat floor.”

“Th-then...?”

Did Myonri want to hear the answer or not? Or was she afraid to not hear it? Whatever the case, Heivia winked at her and pointed straight up.

“The ceiling. Have the bomb dangle down like a deadly disco ball and it can send its shrapnel down on everyone without the wall of people stopping it.”

“That would be easiest. 177. The ceiling is reinforced with narrow steel beams arranged like a jungle gym. A human could walk on them, but quadrupedal unmanned weapons like the Bullmites couldn’t.”

“They want to kill my father... And they’re willing to kill 50,000 people at once to do it...?”

“You don’t need to focus your justice on the general public,” smoothly said Wraith. “The one family member is more important to you than 50,000 strangers, right? There’s more to relationships than numbers. There’s nothing wrong with feeling that way.”

Her words were not at all blunted and tore sharply into the human heart, so they may have been similar to those of a high-IQ serial killer. They seemed to carry deep meaning, but the more you thought about them, the more your mind was destroyed by a poison of your own making.

And just then, a flat electronic beep came from the game system held by the brown girl. She glanced down at the flat screen in her hands as if peering down at her own chest.

“114. Mr. Royce’s phone has sent out a signal. It appears to be a phone call.”

“Oh, did you give him his phone back when you released him and sent him to the general shelter? What a pain.”

Wraith sounded annoyed, but the swim ring girl continued her report.

“Any idea who he might be calling? 251.”

“...”

The 4m ringlet curls trembled as if stirring.

What was the girl inside the thick armor doing?

“Don’t answer it,” sharply warned Wraith. “There is a chance the unknown third party is monitoring Royce’s phone to gather information. We would gain nothing by letting them know we’re here.”

She knew that.

She really did.

The beeping never seemed to end and that seemed to reveal Royce’s worry for his daughter. Oh Ho Ho seemed to be clenching her teeth. Finally, it automatically switched over to voice mail and the game system in Melly’s hands stopped beeping.

Oh Ho Ho spoke with a tremor in her voice.

“I’m glad...”

Myonri tried to say something, but she did not manage to get anything out.

“I’m so glad he’s alive...”

Heivia sighed quietly like those forced-out words were messing with his mood. He wanted to maintain his purity as an avenger, but it was not working. And he gave a warning with that look on his face.

“Hey, don’t relax just because you know he’s alive. This isn’t over until we’ve actually saved him.”

“I know that. Ho...oh ho ho. You don’t have to tell me that.”

Melly got them back on topic while kicking her brown legs now that she was used to the potatoes’ rude gazes.

“The signal is coming from the second gym. Unless we assume more is going on than meets the eye, Mr. Royce should be there. But only we should know

this. 125. There are three gyms and each one holds more than 50,000 people. Now, does the attacker have any way of accurately locating Mr. Royce?"

"Didn't you mention the possibility of them monitoring his phone? Well, that's just a possibility, so let's set aside the accurate information about that middle-aged man's location. Which one would be the easiest to infiltrate?"

"551. The middle one. The second gym. You can reach the ceiling's steel beams through a maintenance hatch on the roof. That should be far easier than climbing up from below."

"Then that's the place."

"W-we're basing it on which one is easier? Ho...oh ho ho. What happened to my father's life being in danger!?"

"I really don't need that giant camel toe in my face, so back up some. And did you forget? There are more than 50,000 people in each gym. Even if there's no direct damage in one, what will happen if they learn of unthinkable casualties in the one right next to it? It's an identical facility on the same campus. They'll assume they're next, so they won't just stay put like they were told. But the exits are narrow, so they'll start trampling each other and we'll end up with tens of thousands of people caught in the secondary and tertiary damages."

"..."

"During the winter, the chickens on a farm will gather together for warmth, but sometimes the group in the center will be crushed to death. This will be even more horrific than that."

They had a plan.

They of course had to keep an eye on the first and third gyms, but the second one was their top priority.

As seen at concert stadiums, it could take 15 to 30 minutes for tens of thousands of people to enter or leave a location. There was no time to evacuate everyone and unnecessary movement could lead the attacker to expedite their plan and start the detonation.

Melly Martini Extradry, the Pilot Elite and New York's defense commander,

did not seem to have any strong feelings on the matter. She must have been worried about the battery because she hooked a hand-cranked generator to her flat game system and began cranking away.

“That powered suit and I won’t be able to do much of anything on the narrow steel beams. 997. And we don’t want to trigger a panic, so firing up from the floor filled with civilians would be a bad idea.”

“I know that. Information Alliance or not, these are safe country civilians. I’m not digital enough to calmly fire within a sea of blood to complete my mission. Unlike a certain idiot who executed a civilian to save her own skin.”

“With that in mind, I have a suggestion. The second gym is the easiest to infiltrate, but it also gives us an advantage. 656. Since the ceiling beams are connected to the flat roof by the maintenance hatch, you don’t have to finish off the attacker there. You can drive them up onto the roof.”

“...What?”

“That concept machine and I can function just fine on the flat roof. Your reports suggest this person is nimble enough to move from rooftop to rooftop, so they’re almost certainly a flesh-and-blood human. I can hardly see how we would be overpowered in a direct fight. 176. It would be nice if we could just fire at them through the roof, but then the bullets could hit the civilians on the floor.”

“Are you kidding, ring girl? You’re going to fight on the front line? Didn’t you say something about your spine being messed up?”

“202. Then try shooting me.”

The brown girl readily said that despite having her butt inside the large ring and her only equipment being the crimson paper surgical gown and the game system. When he stared at her, wondering if she really understood the situation, she began trembling.

“Are you serious? I have more curly hairs in the corner of my room than I have a conscience. To be honest, it’s hard to find any reason at all to hold back against any piece of shit with the Martini name.”

“That’s my point. You won’t trust anything I say. 081. So the only way to teach

you is through experience.”

Heivia wrapped a thick and fluffy scarf around a nearby plastic bottle for a makeshift silencer, pressed it against the muzzle of his handgun, and immediately pulled the trigger.

It released a muffled gunshot, but it was not Melly or Wraith who looked surprised.

Melly Martini Extradry had her butt in the large ring and her hands and feet off the floor, so she could not move around properly. There was also nothing for her to hide behind. Nevertheless, her ring spun around like the coffee cups at an amusement park and cleanly avoided all three bullets.

“Are you okay? 444. I appreciate the thought to use a silencer, but when the noise and the actual recoil are different, I’ve heard you can let your guard down and hurt your wrist.”

Her movement could not have been that fast.

But there was no way that could be explained away as a simple coincidence.

“655. To reveal the trick, I slightly tilted the Manhattan 000 below us. And unlike before, it wasn’t enough to notice.”

Melly softly exhaled and used her thin game system’s L and R triggers to rotate her ring right and left.

“The world’s largest Object is always a part of me. I take top priority. Even Capulet is only borrowing it from me. The internal parts that move the Manhattan 000 are essentially the same as the liquid inside this ring. 713. Okay? Are you familiar with carnivorous plants?”

“Carnivorous...plants?”

“Some plants can move quite quickly, like the Venus flytrap. That is done with turgor pressure, the movement of liquid between the cells. That isn’t actually all that difficult to reproduce in a machine. And it’s easier to manage in parallel than something with lots of old-fashioned motors and cranks. 409. It’s also used as the catalyst for the quantum computer needed for the balance calculations to make sure it doesn’t collapse under its own weight. In addition to lasers,

Josephson junctions, and quantum dots, quantum bits can be managed with the NMR method using a liquid. You'll even see it mentioned in comics and novels."

Quantum computers and DNA computers were the two representative examples of non-von Neumann large-scale processors. Since they had selected something other than the Anastasia Processor that used cancer cells from Wraith's biological mother, the Information Alliance must have had its own internal competition there, but that was not the point.

"Did you think I was dressed like this for no reason? I control it through physical contact with this ring-shaped device. 333. Simply put, my blood contains the same liquid as the supercomputer. That was the only way to make up for what the game system alone couldn't do."

She had predicted the ballistic trajectory in advance.

The girl was one with Manhattan.

"I have perfect calculations and the ability to physically interfere with the field itself. Plus, I command every single unmanned weapon protecting the city of Manhattan. 144. Do you still think I wouldn't be useful in a fight?"

The Object was based on plants and the unmanned weapons were based on plants and animals. With the serverless artificial life forms and the simple circuits that used swarm intelligence, Manhattan was like a planet of machines.

Wraith did not seem all that surprised and cut in as if simply confirming what she already knew.

"But the Manhattan 000 must be too large to fire on a specific individual hiding in the shelter. You'll probably have to put together a unit of Bullmites and other unmanned weapons, but will the law enforcement regulations really be enough?"

"You must be kidding. These things' greatest advantage is a tactic that would run afoul of various treaties if you used it in war. In other words, artificial organic concentration."

The ring girl spun around the flat screen to show them. It displayed a graph about the contents of the air, but they did not want to think about what it meant.

“It’s the same concept as fish and shellfish absorbing plankton and other toxins from the seawater and storing them in their stomach, but there is no limit when it comes to unmanned weapons. Because you don’t have to worry about the lethal level. And the basic toxins can be found anywhere in the world. How many pollutants do you think you can find in the exhaust and dirty water in Manhattan alone? But it’s not even a ten thousandth of the lethal level, so they say it’s safe and you don’t have to worry about it. 883. So just concentrate that down more than ten thousand times and you have a deadly weapon at zero cost. You can take a human life with the prick of a needle. I don’t normally do that, though.”

“I see. So that’s why they have air purifiers. I thought that seemed out of place.”

It was well known that the hollow point bullets banned by war treaties were commonly used by the police and thugs in cities. The line between humane and inhumane was easily changed for people’s convenience.

Heivia breathed from his nose and fired twice more for good measure, but the result was exactly the same. When he saw Melly spin around in her ring, he decided any more would be a waste of ammo. And if the makeshift silencer broke, he would spread confusion through the attacker and civilians.

“If you’re willing to go and get yourself killed, then be my guest. But your ass doesn’t look too soft, so don’t expect me to support it.”

“Then I will look after it on my own. 111. The best way to shock malicious people is to do sensible things for nothing in return.”

Was the entire Martini Series like this? She too was quite crafty.

The gyms were the size of indoor stadiums. They were as tall as four-story school buildings and they had metal emergency stairs on the outside.

The roof really was entirely flat. It had no slant whatsoever.

Was the attacker already here or would they be arriving later? There was no evidence one way or the other, but they did not have time to stand around.

“Let’s act on the assumption that they’re here. Myonri, come with me.”

“O-okay.”

“What should we do?”

Black-uniformed Wraith asked that, but Heivia only gave a snort of laughter.

“Wipe that smile off your face. Do you want me to shove this right up your ass? It doesn’t matter if you were always crazy or if you were broken by that active self-denial stuff. I’m not going to trust the piece of shit that executed a supposed ally when she was told to.”

“...”

“Whatever the case is now and whatever our original affiliations were, Quenser thought of you as an ally then and he risked his life to protect you from Manhattan’s attack. And you shot him. While looking him right in the eye. That’s not even war. None of that has changed. Don’t forget that your actions are good or bad regardless of your reasons for doing them.”

That was all.

Myonri fidgeted nervously as she listened, but Wraith did not bother with it any longer. Heivia left that lonely girl and slowly opened the square trap door attached to the flat roof.

After climbing through, he found quite a few steel beams arranged like a giant jungle gym.

Naturally, there was no stable floor. If he slipped, he would fall the four-story distance down to the ground level. And people filled the stacked second and third floors as well as the fields and courts. Everyone seemed to have enough space to lie down and stretch out, but if he fell, he could not avoid hitting someone.

“I see him directly below us,” softly said Myonri.

Among the shocking number of human heads, there was one person operating a smartphone. He stood out from the many other smartphone users because he was repeating the same short action over and over instead of focusing on typing text into social media.

“So that’s Royce.”

“How many times has he tried now? He must still be trying to call his daughter.”

Of course, he would never get through since his daughter was not answering. They were on the same university campus, but he could not even get a single word to her.

But no matter how coldly he was being rejected, Royce showed no sign of irritation. He pressed the electronic device’s screen against his forehead, shut his eyes, and seemed to wish for something before repeating the same action yet again. He was simply a father hoping for his family’s safety.

“We definitely have to save him, don’t we?” said Myonri in a quiet voice. “Without even thinking about the four world powers or anything like that.”

“We can’t give her father special treatment. If we’re doing this, we’re saving all of them. It doesn’t matter if the blast actually hits them or not. If there’s an explosion somewhere, they’ll panic and trample each other. It’ll be worse than a swimming tournament full of sumo wrestlers. Once it starts, tens of thousands could die.”

Once they climbed down, they found it was harder to walk than expected. The steel beams had lots of small bumps from all the rivets and there were also thumb-thick power cables running everywhere for the halogen lamps lined up at even intervals.

Nevertheless...

Even so...

Heivia saw a silhouette. He saw a human silhouette at his eye level. They were curled up on the unsteady beam and he recognized the way they moved their thumb to prepare something. It actually felt nostalgic. It was just like that person who had always been by his side, setting up Hand Axe plastic explosives in some unbelievable place for some trick to fight against the world’s most powerful colossal weapons.

He had considered it.

Yes, he would be lying if he said he had not considered it.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had shot Quenser in front of Heivia's eyes. But he had not actually seen what happened to the corpse after it fell into the ocean. So what if? Could it be? Perhaps Quenser Barbotage was actually still alive and following some super secret plan that not even Heivia was aware of.

So.

So.

So.

He clenched his teeth, but it was not enough. The shock was so great that it forced his voice from the depths of his throat.

And his voice formed a single name.

"Skuld...Silent-Third!?"

The person he saw there was a short and undeveloped girl with long blonde twintails who perfectly wore the skintight special suit of a Pilot Elite.

She was also the Faith Organization's greatest and most horrific serial killer.

It was not Quenser at all.

Part 21

This seems sudden?

Of course it does. That was a name one must never search. The editors of an online encyclopedia that could be edited by anyone grew stubborn when the information was repeatedly deleted, so they had pushed for the public release of the Madagascar Report which had been sealed by the military. But as a result, they had been killed in a highly suspicious railroad accident. That was the kind of taboo this was.

There was no sign of it coming?

Again, it is only natural not to remember. The great war crime that Quenser and Heivia ran across in the Madagascar Report is not something to look back on. It is a memory that prevents one from living a bright, happy, and enjoyable life.

Skuld Silent-Third.

She was one of the three Pilot Elites of the Faith Organization's Second Generation Trinity Style, officially designated Norn, but she was also a serial killer who used that position to sink her venomous fangs into victims in battlefields around the world.

That incident had supposedly been ended by Quenser's bombs.

However, that same mass murderer had cast aside her blades, guns, and even her Object. She now held a bomb.

What did that mean?

Heivia Winchell's grimaced because he knew the answer.

Part 22



“Nice to see you again, Heivia. And the girl...what was her name again?”

She smiled brightly.

If that was all, it would have been an innocent girl’s smile that inspired a protective desire in all who saw it. Her bright green special suit was held tight against the minimal curves of her slender body and a large ribbon provided a florid touch that felt out of place. Her allure combined the cuteness of a younger girl with the seductiveness of an older girl. But that was exactly how she had fooled so many people, relaxed their tension, created an opening, and ultimately consumed them.

“But it’s too bad. Quenser was the one I most wanted to see. Look, it’s Hand Axe! I went to a lot of trouble getting the real deal, so I have to make its debut worth it.”

“What...are you doing?”

He knew. He knew who this was in front of him.

But Heivia raised his voice with a look of utter disbelief.

“Why the hell did the Faith Organization let you out of your cage!? Is everyone in this world a crazy girl!?”

“Love and hate are complexly intertwined, Heivia. Just like how I came to love explosions. Ah ha ha! It’s just like the stereotype that, if you look into a serial killer’s background, you’ll find they were terribly abused when they were young. Y’know, where you can say everyone involved was a victim. Ha ha ha ha ha!!”

Myonri was clearly shaken and Heivia immediately switched from his handgun to his knife. It too was a “self-defense” item he had taken from the diligent New Yorkers. It was a survival knife with a blade measuring more than 40cm, but he was not trying to show off.

His enemy’s primary weapon was bombs.

If he moved in close, she would have more difficulty using them without being in the blast radius herself.

“Nee hee hee!!”

One wrong step and they would plummet down. Heivia started running across the ceiling beam and the slender girl named Skuld only laughed maniacally. As the bare blade targeted her unguarded slender throat with a horizontal slash, she actually held out a clay-like block of Hand Axe plastic explosive.

Instead of blocking it with a solid barrier, she was causing the blade to slip as if with oil. Heivia shuddered when he felt the attack miss and then Skuld used her soft-looking lips to stick a pen-shaped electric fuse into the sliced explosive.

Since it resembled a party game where two people held either end of a skinny chocolate snack in their lips, the action carried a seduction not usually found in such a young girl, but the situation was dire.

Her blonde twintails fluttered around her in what seemed like a self-celebratory dance, but Skuld Silent-Third was preparing the explosive despite being less than a meter from her opponent!?

(Is she relying on her Elite special suit!?)

“Oh, while it can handle blades and bullets, this thing can’t protect me from a major explosion.”

She seemed to have read his mind. And at the same moment, Skuld readily detonated the bomb inside her own young hand.

“!!!???”

Something odd happened.

It was different from a normal explosion that spread destruction in a sphere from the central point. It was more like an infinitely-extending blade of light. When Skuld swung her arm, the scorching blade passed by Heivia’s face and burned right through all of the jungle gym-like beams in its path.

(This is worse than at Madagascar!? What kind of movement was that!?)

The blast had been concentrated in a single direction.

The bomb had detonated in her hand, but there was not a drop of blood on the body showing its minimal curves through the green special suit. She licked from her palm to her fingertips in a very seductive way for such a young girl.

“This is nothing unusual.”

“Damn you...!”

“Any old fireworks craftsman can do the same thing. Explosions are all about fluid dynamics, so it’s the same as the flow of water or air. If you restrain the blast with a sheet of metal and intentionally leave a single hole open, the explosively-expanding combustion gas will be naturally guided through there. Of course, the guns you’re so familiar with use the same basic principle.”

There had to be more to it.

In theory, you could create a bomb with a single metal pipe. But if an amateur actually tried it, they were guaranteed to blow themselves up in the process. Massive amounts of knowledge and technique were needed to realize that theory. And the mass murderer named Skuld had done so with her own two hands instead of factory equipment.

It was just like that boy who would rely on adlibbed methods and pull them off with no practice whatsoever.

She had inherited it.

It was like the girl carried that powerful enemy inside her undeveloped chest.

Myonri frantically raised her shotgun once more, but Skuld simply held out her hand. Another explosion drowned out the gunshot. It was like a magic trick. The single shotgun shell had to contain tons of small metal balls, but the beautiful serial killer did not have a scratch on her. Had she diverted their path with a solid shockwave barrier?

No...

“...When using explosions, the most important thing is to know what your opponent is thinking.”

With a sticky smile reminiscent of sweet nectar, Skuld embraced her own slender body. Her fingers traced across her own minimal curves. She pulled in her long blonde twintails as well, her spine trembled, and she shook from self-produced sensuality.

“I thought the feeling in my wrist when I stabbed or strangled someone was all there was. But the reality was different. Bombs have their own sensation!!

You set up a trap no one is expecting, you actually detonate it, and you rule their heart with fear. Ohh, it's so wonderful!! Take...whatever her name is there. You were afraid before you even fired. You feared that shotgun couldn't possibly kill a true monster. So even though you had the overwhelming advantage of aiming a gun at me from a distance, the sound of no more than a tiny explosion caused you to shrink down and shift your own aim. Is there...is there any other killing method that lets you feel their soul more than this!?"

"Shut the hell up..."

Their military training no longer mattered.

It was the same as the incident from the sealed Madagascar Report. Whenever this girl made an appearance, the rules of war collapsed.

"I've had enough of your bitching. You're no more than a wandering ghost who lost her place to die, so I'm not going to let you sully that bastard's name!!"

"Nee hee. Is that the Legitimacy Kingdom's obsession with honor?"

He swung his knife and used the handgun he had decided against earlier, but Skuld jumped to another steel beam a step behind her and he could not do any real damage. She stayed the same distance from him while her twintails and ribbon fluttered around her in a nightmarish and fantastical dance.

The goddess of death and war performed an elegant dance. And seeing that, Heivia raised his voice.

"Myonri, prepare to fire!"

"B-but I can't hit her!"

"Don't let the title of serial killer get to you. Whether she's 'awakened' or broken through her limits, she's still human. Aim for the power cables for the halogen lights!! The footing is already limited, so fill these metal beams with a powerful electric current and not even she will be able to escape!!"

"Oh, that's what you're going with? Emotional sacrifices are so boring. It's a death as bland as a chain burger." Skuld placed a hand on her delicate-looking hip and sounded exasperated. "Well, I don't really care what happens after I've

had my fun. And I believe I've more than half completed my initial objective."

"?"

"Look down below."

The twintail girl sneered as she placed her lightly-clenched fist below her navel and pointed her index finger straight down.

"I still haven't caused any direct damage, but I have detonated a few bombs inside the gym. If everyone heads for the exits at once, what do you think'll happen to those 50,000 people?"

"You perverted necrophile girl!!"

"Ah hah hah!!"

Heivia and Myonri knew not to, but they could not stop their eyes from briefly glancing down. And in that instant, Skuld Silent-Third climbed through one of the square maintenance hatches.

Their target had gotten away, but Myonri actually wiped the sweat from her slender chin and breathed a sigh of relief.

"That achieves the bare minimum of our objectives...right? The Information Alliance group is up there. Wraith, Melly, and the giant Oh Ho Ho."

"...I'm not so sure."

Heivia used his handgun to shoot out several of the large halogen lights hanging down from the steel beams. They scattered some glass and a lot of sparks.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

"I've created a peaceful explanation for those explosions. Hey, Myonri, you're good with computers, right? Rewrite that online encyclopedia that anyone can edit!! Say that in the Central American ocean the pressure change from a storm can cause incandescent and halogen bulbs to burst from internal pressure. The actual reasoning behind it doesn't have to hold up to scrutiny. Just give them something they can look up and accept for the time being!!"

"I thought we couldn't access the actual internet here!"

“I don’t know if it’s a virtual space or a fake server, but just get it out there so those people will see it!”

People were susceptible to multiple sources. You might hear rumors around you and then find confirmation on the screen in your hand...but in some cases, they both had the same source of information.

As Skuld had said, no direct harm had been done yet. There was nothing Heivia and Myonri could do here except prevent the people from trampling each other in a panic.

“Myonri, let’s head up top.”

“Eh? I’d rather not. A powered suit and those serverless unmanned weapons will be fighting on that flat roof. Even if the battle will end without our help, a single stray bullet can still kill us!”

“This won’t end that easily,” spat out Heivia. “I don’t care how many of those damn Martinis die, but if Skuld escapes, she’ll cause far more damage. And I’m not just talking about Manhattan. You saw the nightmare of that sealed Madagascar Report with your own eyes, didn’t you? Didn’t you see and agree to seal it all away because it felt like having your nose shoved into some old man’s hairy asshole?”

“...”

“If you want proof, just face your own trauma. That’s all you need to explain what a threat Skuld is.”

Myonri gulped.

That was all. She had no rebuttal for Heivia’s seemingly incoherent argument.

They both approached the maintenance hatch Skuld had left through.

They climbed up onto the flat and supposedly safe roof.

They saw the scene they had expected but not wanted.

“Oh, perfect timing. I’m about ready for a second helping☆”

There was a single smile there.

And it was surrounded by hell.

Despite her confidence, Melly Martini Extradry was trapped in the scraps of the many Bullmites that had protected her.

The powered suit that had supposedly carried the Information Alliance idol Elite had what looked like giant claw marks running across it and an orange horizontal line had sliced through it at about chest height. The size was larger, but it was shaped just like the real idol. The cockpit's empty space was exposed and it lay collapsed and sparking in a more gruesome fate than for a normal tank or armored truck.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray held her small hand to the right side of the young man who lay protectively over her. She was desperately trying to stop his bleeding. It looked more like it was caused by a gunshot than an explosive blast, so it may have been a flying screw or nail rather than the actual explosion.

The girl held her slender body in her arms and her back trembled as she basked in the afterglow. Yes, the afterglow. It was already over.

She really was worse than at Madagascar. The serial killer had evolved through the acquisition of bombs.

"Well, this was a shock for me too," she said. "I really thought there was someone inside that powered suit, but it was being remotely controlled."

Come to think of it, the 4m ringlet curls controlled by that Elite had fallen on her butt during the makeshift chaff attack meant to eliminate the coordination of the Bullmites in the university building. And when she had avoided carelessly answering the call from her father, had it been to prevent Oh Ho Ho's real location from being found out? She could not have anyone tripping her up until she had actually saved her father.

"That sure was elaborate," spat out Skuld.

That was all. Her brief arousal was already cooling.

"But I guess that was the peak of my surprise. Are those all the tricks up your sleeve? If so, it just wasn't enough. I want a dinner that will really fill my belly. So bring out the next serving already. Or do I need to visit the second and third restaurant?"

"Your attempt to cause a panic in the gym failed, Skuld..."

“Does the Faith Organization need a reason to attack the Information Alliance? Or does a serial killer need a reason to kill people? It’s just who we are. What more can you say?”

“It’s not like you’re going to follow the Faith Organization’s rules either! You were convicted under Faith Organization law, abandoned, and thrown in prison!! You expect us to believe a serial killer is diligently doing her job!?”

“Ah ha ha!! Diligently? Well, does it look like I’m doing a good job?”

If she was trying to kill Royce so that his daughter, Oh Ho Ho, would spread further chaos through Manhattan, then Skuld could not have carelessly attacked Oh Ho Ho. She had only learned the powered suit was empty after slicing it in two, so it looked planned but was fundamentally flawed. Was there no way of controlling her?

“Al – so. None of that matters and I don’t care. I have no hard feelings for the Legitimacy Kingdom that defeated me in Madagascar or the Faith Organization that used me as long as they could and then judged me like they were the heroes. I have no complaints. I’m satisfied as long as I can kill. I don’t even need a war. Back at Madagascar, I made myself valuable with my skill as a Pilot Elite, so the higher ups would cover things up. Those circumstances are all that’s changed. I’ll make myself valuable in some other way and have someone important create an environment where I’m free to kill. There were no deep reasons behind it. That cruel IV had its uses! The passage of time may have blurred, but everything but the killing and the memories of killing melted away from my mind. What is that if not freedom?”

No matter what, that mass murderer could not forget the taste of killing.

She did not need to use a vast conspiracy or a superpower’s interests as an excuse. She was a purer and crueler slaughterer who faced the killing head-on.

“Still, there is one thing I want.”

Skuld Silent-Third wrapped her young hands around either side of her small face and lightly twisted her slender hips as she tried to restrain the pleasure signals rising within her. Her entire body radiated something far uglier than unrequited love.

“I wanted to see Quenser. I wanted to see my teacher who taught me this new art of bombs!! See, now I can kill even more people. You were wonderful, teacher, but I can kill far more. So now it’s my turn to teach you. I can give you a lovey-dovey hands-on lesson in how to enjoy bombs!! Heh heh. Ah hah hah hah hah!!”

“...You’re completely insane. Do you have threads sewn between the wrinkles in your brain or something?”

“Quenser Barbotage was normal.”

In an unexpected turn, there was no emotion in her voice at all.

It was the stereotypical form of someone who could not control the switch between mania and depression.

“He was normal, but he could still kill without a second thought. Had you not noticed after spending so much time with him? He was far worse than a serial killer like me. I mean, he couldn’t have survived that long otherwise. How many Objects and the armies around them do you think *my teacher* has blown away in the past? Killing and remaining normal is a frightening thing. How could he do it?”

She did not need to say any more.

Myonri was enthralled and stood stock still, but Heivia moved almost automatically. He had a knife in his right hand and a handgun in his left. He charged toward the twintail girl in order to suppress her at a range of less than 2 meters.

“Oh, right, right. What are you going to do about that?”

Meanwhile, twintailed Skuld had no gun or blade.

Her voice was as casual as someone making an invitation to chat over tea.

“Does the term Ragnarok Script mean nothing to you? What about active self-denial? A mysterious external factor was injected into the Martini Series, but where do you think it really came from?”

“Wha-...!?”

Heivia still had not shaken his doubts.

Even if this was Skuld Silent-Third, could she really have had such an overwhelming advantage on a roof full of unmanned weapons and a powered suit? What if the Martini Series had lost control there? What if a switch had been thrown and either Wraith or Melly had attacked Oh Ho Ho? After what had happened to the powered suit, would he be safe without that kind of armor? Could he really trust that those Martinis were defeated? What if he turned his back on the group that included the monster who had shot Quenser?

“That’s just in the way, don’t you think? It just ruins your fun.”

“!?”

The next thing he knew, Skuld was moving toward him.

The slender girl’s right hand had latched onto Heivia’s handgun. But not in order to take it from him. Quite the opposite. She pressed the muzzle against her soft-looking belly and repeatedly pulled the trigger.

Dry gunshots rang out and the impacts to her soft lower body caused the girl to double over.

“Kee hee.”

But the gun ran out of ammo in no time.

The handgun in his hand was no more than a lump of metal.

“Hee hee hee hah hah!! Yes, yes. That’s right. Pain is only another form of pleasure and defeat is the motivation needed to grow!! Right, Quenser? This is the place. This is the best. The most enjoyable aspect of life is the moment when you stand back up from overwhelming defeat to turn it all around!!”

Even if her suit provided some defense against bullets, that had still been suicidal. The bullets might not break through, but the shock still reached her, so it could have torn her muscles or damaged her organs.

And yet.

That murder fairy named Skuld showed only a smile of ecstasy.

“The Ragnarok Script?”

She questioned the thing she herself had just mentioned.

“Do you really think that exists? Ah ha ha!! Investigate all you like, you’ll never find it. After all, it never existed.”

“What are you...going on about? That’s what caused this entire mess...!”

“You take something that doesn’t exist and make it look like it does exist to produce a certain effect. Isn’t that how the Information Alliance does things? Of course, it was based on a psychological safety device set in place by the powerful people who control the formless Capulet AI Network. If the Martini Series ever gained more popular support than those powerful people, they could leak that supposed vulnerability to end that boom. ...Our agents dug it up while infiltrating the Information Alliance and it was reinterpreted into a form we could use more easily. That is the Ragnarok Script.”

“ ...”

Ragnarok.

That was the final battle in Norse Mythology. Afraid of his prophesied death, Odin planned out a way to stop it but ultimately earned enough resentment to get himself devoured by a beast just as the prophecy foretold. It was a merciless myth with no chance for recovery.

Yet if he had never taken the prophecy seriously, nothing would have happened in the first place.

“When their self-confidence is shaken and they lose sight of themselves, those Martinis succumb to the AI far more easily. So there was no need for active self-denial. The Faith Organization has far more experience when it comes to matters of the heart.”

Skuld sounded like she was letting them in on a juicy secret.

“In Faith Organization terms, it may be a lot like banning Mary adoration or Thor worship. And as long as the true result of the lie is effective, the rest doesn’t matter. The Martinis really are bound by the nonexistent threat, aren’t they?”

Similarly, Heivia had lost his valuable firepower due to this girl’s words.

There was nothing he could do with no bullets in his gun. Since her skintight

special suit was blade-resistant, his options were limited with his knife.

“We whisper about the Ragnarok Script and the Martinis are bound. Even if they know it doesn’t exist, they can’t cleanse the damage to their soul. It’s like a curse. Maybe this is the result of controlling the Information Alliance’s fear with Faith Organization methods.”

“Tch...!?”

“Oh? What are you going to do? I don’t think you have time to swap magazines.”

He did not have time to be surprised by each and every one of her actions. As soon as Skuld let go of the empty handgun, she dropped a small piece of plastic explosive to her feet, detonated it, and used the blast to rotate her own body. Her weight shifted in a way that wouldn’t have been possible for a normal human and she sent a roundhouse kick as heavy as a demolition hammer toward the side of Heivia’s head.

As long as it was enjoyable and fun, she did not care what happened to her own body.

Heivia responded to the lunatic’s joy by lowering his arm. He did not let his arm be broken to protect his head. He dropped the empty handgun and slid it into the gap between the roof and the raised heel of Skuld’s pivot leg.

“Oh?”

She lost her balance and the axis of her roundhouse kick wobbled.

Skuld missed and, before she could straighten back up, Heivia tackled her childish hips. He placed the knee of her roundhouse kick on his shoulder and flipped her over. No, his hand would still have held the large survival knife.

They collapsed in a heap with Skuld on her back and Heivia on top of her. He held the survival knife in both hands with the tip in the center of her flat chest. Skuld used both hands to push back up, but he had the mounted position. No amount of squirming would let the slender serial killer escape from below the boy. As he pushed down on the knife with all his weight, it slowly moved down millimeter by millimeter. The sharp tip was definitely approaching Skuld’s vitals.

“Enough...”

Heivia shouted with the bloodshot eyes of something other than a soldier who killed for his job.

“I’ll kill you!! I won’t let anyone else end this. We screwed up in Madagascar! We should’ve done this from the beginning!!”

“Oh? Are you forcing yourself? Quenser is one thing, but I thought you acted as the brakes.”

Skuld was weaker. She could not overturn things here, so she could only watch as the blade slowly but surely reached her heart. Even if her Pilot Elite special suit was blade resistant, the weight would still reach her. The blade might not be able to cut the fibers, but the weight would gather on one point, like she was being stepped on with high heels, and her young ribs and sternum would be broken.

But as she lay on her back, Skuld continued to smile.

And she was not forcing it. Nor was she escaping to a paradise only she could see.

All of a sudden, Heivia realized Hand Axe plastic explosives were scattered at the vertices of an equilateral triangle with Skuld and her seductive bodylines in the center. Her inappropriate outfit added to the illusion that this was a magic circle drawn out on the floor and she was holding a blasphemous sacrificial ceremony using her own body.

The girl licked her lips in a way far too sinister for her lovely facial features.

“When using an icepick, the trick to silently breaking the window to reach the lock inside is to use a triangle. You make a crack and remove the bare minimum of glass at the vertices. And can’t you look at this roof the same way?”

“Damn you...!!”

He could definitely kill Skuld like this.

But to be certain, he had to take his time slowly pushing the blade down. He could not end it right this instant.

That was why Skuld Silent-Third’s slender white throat moved alluringly as she

laughed.

“I’ve made it so I’ll fall. I’ll break off the roof around me. And there are 50,000 people below. I’m covered in my full stock of Hand Axe, so if I go out in an impressive explosion, just what color of flower will blossom down there?”

“...!!!!???”

“Don’t give me that look. It might not cause that much damage at all. With that many people together, their flesh will function as a barrier. Ah ha ha! So how about you pray for a miracle, Brake Boy?”

He could not let go with his hands. It was his weight bearing down on them that was restraining Skuld. If he let go and released her, she would cause even more harm.

Myonri was overwhelmed and had fallen into a seated position, so he could not rely on her. Everyone else had been defeated, so he could not expect support from them either.

There was nothing he could do.

He knew the tragedy that was about to occur, yet he could find no plan to stop it!?

“Here’s what Quenser would do.” It was entirely out of place, but Skuld sounded like a dreaming maiden. “The options are to safely draw back or charge forward despite the danger. He would definitely charge forward. He would prioritize defeating his enemy over protecting himself and allowing the situation to grow even worse. I understand him. I understand the human being named Quenser Barbotage...”

Just then, something changed.

It was a gunshot.

Right into the center of her flat chest.

A bullet was fired from the self-defense handgun held by a small bloody hand.

“Wrai...th...?”

The black-uniform girl did not respond to Heivia.

She had walked over at some point and she had not hesitated to pull the trigger while looking down on the twintailed murderer.

“Don’t joke.” Her voice was trembling like she was about to cough up blood. “Quenser Barbotage would never do that!! He...that complete moron was such a hopeless ‘human’ that he would make a split-second decision to protect an enemy soldier being targeted by the world’s largest Object!! He was a fundamentally different creature to you or me!!”

The special suit provided some protection against bullets.

But only some.

“I...see.”

Skuld’s eyes wandered aimlessly as if seeing something that was not here and words escaped her mouth.

“Teacher. I was wondering why I didn’t see you here... So *that’s* what happened.”

As if to say she would not allow her to say anymore, Wraith pulled the trigger several more times. She seemed to be bringing the serial killer back to her senses through sensible pain. Skuld had trouble breathing, so she could no longer hold back the knife. Just as her limiter broke and her strength dropped, Heivia used his full weight to drive the 40cm survival knife’s tip into the center of that childish chest.

Thanks to its blade resistance, the special suit itself did not tear.

But the same weight as being stepped on with high heels would destroy the girl’s slender body.

This would end it.

This would settle the entire issue surrounding the Martini Series and the Ragnarok Script. There was no need to worry about the Object losing control. The Manhattan would no longer be a threat.

“I...will not die.”

But the girl’s smile was like a curse at this point.

The mass murderer announced her immortality like the monster in a cheap horror movie.

“I’ve killed enough to know. This pain isn’t coming from my organs. More, more, more. Drive it in more. Crush my organs with my broken ribs and sternum...”

“Shut up and die. We don’t need anything extra. If you’ll just die here it’s all over. I’m not Quenser, so I’m not going to feel sorry for you.”

“Ha ha. Brake Boy, you can’t do it. Only my teacher can kill me. That must have been destined from the moment we were born.”

What meaning did that serial killer see in her own death?

Was it just one more for the pile? Or was she the one exception, so it was a treasure meant only for someone she cared for?

“Or so I thought. How disappointing. But in a way, I guess you could say I achieved my objective. For my purposes, it didn’t have to be Royce.”

“What...?”

Heivia felt like his entire body was covered in tiny insects.

She knew something.

They had already passed the minor issues of the Martini Series and the Ragnarok Script.

The world would roll toward the precipice any number of times.

She probably saw it as a way to bring herself closer to Quenser who had defeated her and had a killing method greater than her own. Just like a stalker’s obsession could gather more information than a professional detective or intelligence agent, she had thoroughly investigated everything about him. Heivia was certain of it.

If only the powered suit had not been remote controlled. If only Oh Ho Ho had been killed by Skuld sooner, this would not have happened.

This extreme evil inspired that sort of misguided regret.

“I went a little overboard and sliced it in half, but can you hear me, Miss

Powered Suit? Or whoever's controlling it, I mean."

"What are you doing? What more could you do!?"

"You don't know?"

She actually looked surprised.

And then Skuld Silent-Third made the worst possible move.

"That girl over there is the one who killed my teacher, Quenser Barbotage, right? I feel bad leaving someone in the dark, so we need to make sure everyone knows."

Part 24

“Welcome to the end of the world.”

The mass murderer spat out the words like blood.

But with a dreamy expression on her face.

“I too am an Elite, so I know the special treatment we get. You came here to protect her father for her own personal needs, didn’t you? But what if she loses someone she cares for just as much?”

Skuld had a twisted obsession with Quenser. She saw him as her teacher in the art of killing.

That was why she had investigated everything about him.

“If the Faith Organization’s predictions are correct, she is more than just an Elite. She is a VIP who can work with the entire formless Capulet AI Network of which Manhattan is just one small piece. To the point that she could singlehandedly fight against the several thousand Martinis. How badly will she lose control when someone who she has a strong connection with dies? I can’t wait to find out. Right, teacher?”

It was true the Martini Series problem had been eliminated.

An even greater threat had emerged, so of course it had.

Between the Lines 2

Situation 325 has been judged a failure.

Skuld Silent-Third's defeat has been confirmed.

It was separate from Royce, but that serial killer met the minimum requirements at the very, very end. I will honestly praise how clever she is. This will safely bring us to the ignition.

This would all be for naught if we could not bring down Manhattan, the Martini Series, and the entire Information Alliance to trigger a world war that draws in all four world powers.

The world desires chaos.

Most religions cannot advance during peacetime. God's righteousness can only be easily explained using god's enemies, an overwhelming disaster, or something else that defies human understanding.

Formless depravity should be feared most of all.

And this clean age is exactly that.

To fight against the silently approaching trend of degeneracy, we must create an obvious enemy. That process is sure to produce a great many victims, but the world must be united if we are to fight against the true, invisible threat.

This age is wrong.

The world was mistaken to support itself with Objects and humanity will never find a bright future along that path. That is simple enough to say, but very few people can explain what exactly is wrong or how to fix it on a quantitative level.

So we must do so. We will supply what is lacking and reach out our hand. Not for social status or honor, but to regain a world where people can live as

people. We will solemnly carry out all necessary actions. We will not fear the critics or historians. After all, we await an unavoidable judgment by a far greater being.

Prepare Module Quenser.

I too will head out.

—From Venerable Elder Tyrting Boilermaker to all my beloved compatriots

Chapter 3: Selector y/n >> All-Out Battle in the Bermuda Triangle

Part 1

In the end, what was Quenser Barbotage to that girl?

They were Information Alliance and Legitimacy Kingdom. They were undeniably enemies. And while the girl was successfully wearing the two hats of Pilot Elite and international idol, Quenser was incomplete even as a puny foot soldier. He was no more than a battlefield student who had cheerfully walked in from a safe country.

Nothing about them fit together and they could not hope to strike a balance. If they found themselves on opposite sides of a war, the girl would probably kill him as just one of the dots on her display, without ever knowing he was there.

That was all it should have been.

But there was something there that could not explain.

Not even the girl knew what that something was. It might have been easy to put to words, but she was hesitant to make it something “ordinary” by defining it with a simple phrase. The movements of her heart seemed simple but held complex meaning. It seemed to reject the very foundation of the Information Alliance that digitally processed everything, slapped a label on it, and adjusted it for easy searching.

So...

So...

So...

Part 2

At that time, Heivia Winchell should have been standing on the flat roof of Columbia University's second gym.

But those standard assumptions suddenly crumbled away.

By the time he felt a heavy impact pass through his entire body, he had already been launched to the side and thrown off of the large roof.

"Oh...?"

He did not understand.

But reality did not wait for the delinquent soldier's understanding to catch up. The situation was underway. No matter how unreasonable it was, the fact remained that he had been thrown from the equivalent of a four-story building.

Manhattan had moved.

It was only a slight stirring, but it produced enough inertial force to break gravity's hold on the people there so they "fell" to the side.

That included Heivia, Myonri, Wraith, the aide young man, Melly, and Serial Killer Skuld.

Every last one of them was helpless.

"Oaaahhhhhhhh!!!???"

Were Heivia's instincts desperately searching for something to grab onto, or was his rational side trying to regain his balance in midair? He had no idea as his limbs flailed meaninglessly. A four story rooftop was the same as a school rooftop. If he fell from there without a plan, he could die on impact.

He heard continuous sounds of something breaking.

"Gah..."

His groan contained the flavor of blood. He had apparently landed in the trees of the thick artificial woods surrounding the gym. It was a complete coincidence. That may have softened the impact, but his tough uniform was torn in places and a dark red color was seeping out.

But he did not have time to lament his misfortune.

He was not sure why, but Oh Ho Ho was boiling over after learning of Quenser's death. Royce's safety could not restrain her now. Heivia did not understand the detailed issues regarding Rush and Juliet, but it seemed Oh Ho Ho could use the Capulet AI Network to take control of Manhattan.

"Hee hee."

He heard laughter.

It was a girl with long blonde twintails who looked like a fairy.

Had her Pilot Elite special suit come in handy, had the luck granted by the grim reaper's love provided something to cushion her, or was an excessive amount of brain chemicals silencing her sense of pain?

Whatever the case, Skuld Silent-Third danced nimbly between the trees. She spread her arms, shook her small butt, and took rhythmic steps.

The greatest serial killer was released into the world once more.

"Nee hee hee. Ah ha ha! Ha ha ha hah hah hah ha ha ha hah hah ah ha ah ha ha ha!!"

"God...dammit!!"

Heivia pulled out the branch stabbed into his upper arm, tossed it aside, and fiercely got to his feet.

"Where are you, swim ring girl? What happened to Manhattan? What did Oh Ho Ho do!?"

His shouts received no response.

Had that girl lost all authority, or was she simply unconscious?

But he could not just sit around and wait for an answer. Even now, Skuld was spinning further and further away between the trees. After collecting the

handgun he had dropped during the fall, Heivia fired twice while down on one knee, but he could not hit with the tree trunks in the way. She looked like she was just having fun, but it was a calculated move.

“Myonri, if you’re still alive, cover me!! If you’re dead, I’m leaving you here!!”

“Ugh, isn’t the Legitimacy Kingdom supposed to be the land of chivalry...? Y’know, like ladies first...?”

A short girl groaned and answered him. She was safe after apparently landing in a pile of recyclable materials – in other words, bags stuffed full of leaves for making mulch.

He began pursuit, but he just about stepped on something with his boot.

Melly’s thin game system was lying there, but an amateur like Heivia had no idea how to even switch screens after picking it up. But when Myonri looked at it, she frowned at the numbers scrolling across the screen.

“Is this saying that Capulet...*isn’t* controlling Manhattan?”

“Huh!?”

“The AI network’s resources are actually being sent to some other task. Um, like if a mischievous cat won’t stop after you scold it, so you distract it by drawing its attention elsewhere. So Oh Ho Ho might be manually operating Manhattan now that it’s free.”

“But the Rush and Manhattan are entirely different machines, right!?”

“I don’t know how it works either!!”

Neither of them were experts, so they would not find the answer by staring at the screen.

For now, they had to deal with the problem before their eyes. They had to chase after Skuld’s lovely back.

“What do we do about the other people?” asked Myonri. “Like Wraith and Melly!?”

“This is no time to worry about Information Alliance soldiers. Skuld is what matters now!! She’s generally heading west, so is there anything there!?”

“Riverside Park. And the ocean beyond that!!”

It was hard to believe she would try to escape a 20,000 meter enemy by stealing a motorboat or small submarine. But aside from those rational thoughts, losing sight of Skuld Silent-Third would be far too dangerous. Manhattan was the center of the Information Alliance, but it was also a safe country that had never seen war. Heivia’s morals were not so broken that he would let them be the target of a serial killer who had even used the clean wars to satisfy her desires.

He heard the rustling of the underbrush parting and a black-uniformed girl stepped out.

“Capulet is an AI. There is a fundamental difference in speed, but I suppose the work done over the network is no different from if a human did it. The Gatling 033 and Manhattan 000 have entirely different structures, but Juliet and Capulet are directly related. If Capulet can do something, then so can an Idol Elite familiar with Juliet.”

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had her self-defense handgun aimed at Skuld’s back.

“No, curse that Idol Elite. She isn’t simply looking at what Capulet is doing and controlling Manhattan 000 in the same way. She checked on Capulet’s tendencies and now she’s controlling the Object through a different line that even the AI network would overlook. You made this happen, you bright and horrific serial killer!!”

“Ha ha.”

Everyone’s eyes were drawn to the beautiful girl who danced like a fairy.

Even with guns aimed at her from multiple directions, she did not put her hands up or cover her head. As if to tell the shortest and optimal route to eat shit, she included pointless and playful actions and danced in quick circular steps as she celebrated her own freedom.

She spread her arms wide, bent her back, pushed her flat chest out, looked up to heaven, and spoke in the loud, carrying voice of an actor in a musical.

“Ha ha! Ah ha ha!! It’s too bad. It really is too bad. So Quenser’s dead, is he?”

And just when I thought I could show my teacher how I had grown. ...But it's strange, isn't it? The Information Alliance that killed him and the Legitimacy Kingdom that let him die are standing side by side and pursuing me for their own benefit. If – you – ask – me, it's almost like they're compromising on something."

"Damn you...!"

She was not trying to provoke Heivia and the others there.

Just as she finished speaking, Manhattan as a whole shook once more. Heivia had to grab onto a nearby streetlight and he heard a low, twisted voice of resentment sounding from all of the speakers linked to the Object.

"I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you..."

"Oh Ho Ho, you idiot!!"

"I will blow you away, destroy you, and slaughter you!!!!!!"

The ground lifted up.

No, Manhattan itself tilted, remaking the entire ground around Heivia's group into a steep incline. The ocean had to be just a few hundred meters ahead, but that shortest escape route was now an unscalable cliff. Metal trashcans, felled logs, and even small cars rolled toward them like boulders.

She was receiving no help from the AI network as she controlled the giant system entirely manually.

"Kh...!!"

Heivia clung tightly to the streetlight and looked ahead to where Skuld was madly dancing among all the falling items. She seemed to have given up on reaching the ocean along that steep slope. However, her actions showed her enjoyment of adlibbing.

"Hey, is that all your love is worth!? My teacher's killer is still standing over there acting like she's the hero!!"

"...!!!!???"

A deafening blast followed.

It couldn't be. Surely she wouldn't go that far.

That sensible side of Heivia's mind was wiped clean.

She had fired.

Did she still hold the reins of that wild horse known as Manhattan or had she lost control of the world's largest Object? Whatever the case, Oh Ho Ho had fired something capable of instantly vaporizing the standard nuke-resistant Objects, as if to say she was willing to tear large chunks out of Manhattan's own giant form. Despite the 10 million people who filled that city.

"Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh|

Was it a giant metal shell from a railgun or coilgun that fell?

It might as well have been a meteor. The artificial scenery of Columbia University's campus garden was torn from the ground. Heivia's body floated up and was slammed on top of the burning grass. He did not have time to choke. If he writhed in one spot, the flames would spread to him.

“Dammit... There’s something wrong with my neck. I don’t care if it’s the Martini army or Capulet; can’t someone stop Oh Ho Ho?”

“Capulet is working on the world’s ten toughest unsolved problems. AI’s purpose is to support human work, so the allotment of resources can vary depending on the amount of human work being done. If that shockingly extraordinary Idol Elite really is controlling Manhattan 000 entirely on her own, Capulet may have decided none of its resources were necessary.”

"That's not what I was-...ow, did my neck just crack!?"

“This is not a normal response. Capulet is more like a cat than a dog. Curse that Idol Elite. She’s already started figuring out how it works. Instead of recklessly shutting it out, she’s distracted it from the tissue box by drawing its attention to the cat toy. That way it withdraws its resources from the Manhattan 000.”

The problem was that Oh Ho Ho was not calmly selecting targets to attack. It was someone else who fully controlled this scene.

"Ah ha, ha ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

They heard the innocent laughter of a child given a new toy by Santa Claus. Skuld danced with her blonde twintails and large decorative ribbon spread out behind her and her back moved into the distance beyond the flames and smoke. Instead of defying the newly-formed steep slope, she gave up on the shortest route to the ocean and returned to densely-populated Manhattan.

“What happened to Oh Ho Ho’s power of friendship!?” asked Heivia.

“Weren’t you just saying something about the Information Alliance soldiers not mattering?” asked Myonri. “More importantly, that’s Harlem over there. If she cuts through there, she can still reach the ocean. And even if she doesn’t go that far, there could be heliports everywhere around here.”

“That G-cup’s dad was in the university, right? What do you think? She’s keeping all this straight in her head, isn’t she!?”

There was a long and narrow area of land to the north as well, but Skuld had not gone that way. So was she searching for the water after all?

Just then, a giant form cast a shadow overhead. Heivia quickly slid down the steep grassy slope to get away before a mass larger than a refrigerator crashed into the ground, crushing the metal pillar he had been clinging to.

It was a clear die with 3 meter sides.

Someone who looked like a beauty pageant winner was contained inside as if time had stopped for them.

“Hey...”

“Is that resin or something?”

Heivia and Myonri were dumbfounded as the burning lawn unnaturally swelled up from below. Was this another of Manhattan’s abilities? Something like clear ivy rose like large snakes rearing their heads. They tangled around the nearby buildings, took the mysterious cubes with them, and came to a complete stop.

Hadn’t Melly said the movable parts mimicked a plant’s structure? Something about turgor pressure? In that case, the clear ivy may have been trees and the dice containing humans may have been fruits.

Civilians could not take a ride on a normal Object.

So with an Object measuring more than 20,000 meters, not even a professional fighter pilot could bear the inertial forces. Then was the Manhattan a waste of ability? No. This was the answer to the problem presented by combat mobility.

By sealing the people away and putting them in a state of suspended animation, the harmful effects could be prevented. The skyscrapers would not have been able to withstand the horizontal shaking of true combat mobility, so the strange ivy was wrapped around them to provide the support needed to prevent a collapse.

Oh Ho Ho intended to provide this assistance to all ten million people in the city.

There was no denying it now. Based on Myonri and Wraith's opinions, it was a clear possibility that Oh Ho Ho could manually control the entirety of Manhattan with just her ten fingers.

"Are you kidding!? How self-righteous can she be!?"

The Information Alliance civilians might be safe with the reinforcement and protection, but if the enemy Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were caught in that, they could easily find themselves in a cell or a forced labor camp the next time they opened their eyes. If they were made a specimen of cold sleep at room temperature in those cubes, their life was effectively over. The risk was greater for Heivia and Myonri, so they began running without worrying about Wraith.

The Object could have its rampage without any risk of killing the people.

They had to continue pursuing Skuld while being pursued by the out-of-control Oh Ho Ho. That high-IQ serial killer was developing a method of manipulating Manhattan and Oh Ho Ho who should have been the greatest threats to her.

They heard what sounded like a heavy freight train moving along the road.

"Oh, no! Watch out for the road! There's a combat train loaded with heavy cannons there. This looks different from those Bullmites and the like. Get behind the buildings!!"

“We can’t go there either! I see swiveling rocket launchers hidden among the parabolic antennae on top of the broadcast tower there! There are at least two with 20 linked boxes each!! They don’t look like autonomous unmanned weapons, so they’re probably linked directly to Manhattan. And the swiveling range overlaps!!”

Was there no safe zone in this city?

Unsure what to do, Heivia and Myonri desperately tried to come up with somewhere for them to go.

“Is Harlem the place I’m thinking it is!?” asked Heivia.

“I’ve heard you don’t want to go there at night or set foot in the back alleys there. In addition to the original local rules, the influx of Hispanic, Asian, Italian, and Russian organizations has made such a mess of the place that first-time tourists can step on a landmine of a taboo at any time.”

But even if it was a dangerous area, it was still in a safe country. Skuld had breathed the air of battlefield country slums all around the world, so to her, it might feel like her own backyard.

However, when they circled behind the buildings, they did not find drug dealers and guns much too large for simple self-defense.

The clear ivy was already wrapped around all the buildings to reinforce them and people of all races and occupations were enclosed in cubes.

Heivia clicked his tongue, avoided the main road while on the lookout for a special camera that stuck out through the small holes in manhole covers, and spotted blonde twintails lightly dancing in the distance.

It was Skuld Silent-Third.

“!!”

He gave no warning this time. Heivia aimed his gun at her like a machine, but she must have seen his reflection in a show window or side mirror because she placed her small hands around her mouth like a megaphone and shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Shoot this coldblooded boy!! Doesn’t it piss you off to see him doing his job

like normal even though Quenser's gone!?"

"Ahhhh!! Uhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!?"

Heivia and Myonri's bodies were once more tugged to the side and yanked from gravity's grasp. What had been a wall covered in wall art of a jazz player had transformed into the ground by the time their feet reached it.

They did not have time to be surprised by every little thing.

They ran along the wall to pursue Skuld. Heivia fired his handgun a few times along the way, but Manhattan would shake to the left or right each time and he could not aim properly. If he was not careful where he stood, he could easily "fall" into the empty gap of the main road which continued for dozens or even hundreds of meters.

"Ugh, we've been standing on the wall for more than a minute now! Is this not a temporary thing!?"

"It depends on how she's doing it, but if she just spins around in one place, it could last for years. This Object could maintain a 1G environment even if it was launched into space."

That said, Oh Ho Ho was in a state of extreme confusion. She seemed unable to focus on any one thing, so it was more like they were thrown out into a storm of violent winds blowing in from every direction. An electric car could not support itself and was thrown sideways and a large dumpster fell from the sky. Using a car or motorcycle in this environment would actually be more dangerous. With each intermittent cannon blast, the skyscrapers along the line of fire were mercilessly destroyed and the rubble poured into the road like an avalanche. The very scenery seemed to distort around them, so the course of pursuit they planned to run down would crumble every few seconds and they would have to think up a new one. At this point, they were not really sure whether they were pursuing Skuld or simply trying to survive.

"The next thing they knew" was the best way of putting it.

While Heivia and Myonri ran recklessly through Harlem, they found themselves on the coast. This had likely been the border of the Harlem River to begin with. The fairy-like murderer hopped across the colliding yachts and

cruisers still moored there. She finally hopped into a high-speed motorboat that probably cost as much as a house.

“Skuld Silent-Third!!”

“Whoops.”

It was a casual thing.

The twintailed demon broke the keyhole with her heel, turned back their way, gave up on hotwiring it, and snapped her fingers.

“After coming all the way to the middle of the Information Alliance, I was hoping to get the powerful engine of a Rosen Kavalier...but oh well. Still, it’s true I also kind of wanted to get a taste of my own death.”

“Let’s end this. The world has enough problems without you. So I’ll end it here. I’ll return you to your grave where a ghost like you belongs!!”

“You can try, but doom is already on its way.”

Skuld placed a hand on her hip that looked as fragile as glass and pointed her other hand straight up.

A moment later, the Manhattan’s cannon blast arrived.

The entire scene was blown away.

It affected the docks, all the yachts and cruisers moored there, and even the uncountable number of skyscrapers knocked down along the line of fire.

Heivia himself was freed from gravity’s hold.

He may have flown up dozens...no, more than a hundred meters.

The next thing he knew, the ocean’s surface filled his vision.

It felt like landing on solid concrete. It did not matter what he thought or did just before hitting. The shock of impact swiftly took away Heivia Winchell’s consciousness.

Part 3

When Heivia Winchell awoke next, he initially could not piece his memories together in order.

What had happened to Skuld, Oh Ho Ho, Myonri, Lendy, and, well, everything?

But the first thing that moved into view was a different face.

He was lying inside a room that felt like a steel box and the Legitimacy Kingdom officer who had abandoned him was looking down at him.

It was Frolaytia Capistrano.

“!!”

(I’ll kill that traitor for abandoning us!!)

The chain of command and hierarchical society meant nothing. Heivia practically sprang up, moved his arms out on reflex, and tried to grab her collar and constrict her carotid artery, but she grabbed his wrists and mercilessly threw him to the floor located a level below the medical bed.

“Ugh, uwehh... Dammit, I see our busty commander is as sadistic as ever. That rules out this being a convenient dream...”

“So you’re awake. That’s what I wanted to know. Now, get back out there. We are seriously lacking in personnel.”

“...Wait, what happened now? You don’t even need to question me?”

“Time was not frozen while you were asleep. Myonri has already filled us in on most everything and the Information Alliance group has corroborated it. That group being Melly Martini Extradry, Lendy Farolito, and Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.”

Hearing the name of the girl who had shot Quenser felt like having a nail

slowly driven into his heart. But if he let that get the better of him, he would be no better than Oh Ho Ho and her rampage in the Manhattan.

Frolaytia had referenced the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance, but that did not cover everything.

“...Then is the Faith Organization’s Skuld Silent-Third still at large?”

“That is certainly a problem, but let’s start with what we can handle now. That means the Manhattan.”

The busty silver-haired commander gestured back with her index finger. She was apparently telling him to go with her. That suggested he really was being sent back into the war. He could not expect any special treatment for being injured. He had essentially taken a step into the afterlife, but as Frolaytia guided him to the medical room’s exit, she looked back and spoke to him.

“There is a lot I would like to say...but for now, good job returning alive. For that you have my praise.”

“...A lot more of us didn’t make it.”

“Yes. It’s a shame what happened to Quenser.”

Once they stepped out into the corridor, it became clear they were on some kind of warship. He found it unlikely, but had they approached the Manhattan to collect him and the others as they floated in the ocean? That did not seem realistic. It would have honestly been suicide.

“It was fortunate that coincided with our fourth recon mission. The battle line had moved somewhat because the Princess was engaged in a quick battle with the Manhattan, so we collected you once that area of ocean was free. Then again, one side of the Baby Magnum was fried as a result.”

“ ... ”

“To be honest, we have to conclude defeating that thing with an external attack is not possible. Even if it was risky, we wanted to collect some people who had internal information.”

...She must have used that excuse to forcibly convince the higher ups.

Heivia’s group had not simply been abandoned and written off in the

paperwork. They had been collected alive. The Manhattan had to be moved away to do so. Just how much of a tightrope walk had the Baby Magnum risked to push that monster back a mere meter? And how many times had she had to do so back to back? The Princess had fought on the front line with no hope of victory and Frolaytia had fought against the high-ranking officers back in the safe countries, so they had to have worn down their souls.

They had given it their all.

But if they had only been a little faster...

“The crux of the issue has shifted from the Martini Series to the Information Alliance Idol Elite. Is that correct?”

“Yes...”

Once they arrived at the ship’s briefing room, many eyes gathered on Heivia. In addition to the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, he saw Lendy, Melly, Wraith, the aide young man, and some other Information Alliance people in one corner. Their respective standpoints had changed. It was now their turn to be on a bed of nails, but given how they had treated him, Heivia was not about to show them any kindness. They needed to be thankful they had been collected at all.

Heivia then realized that he stood out as much as the Information Alliance group.

It was true most everyone here was Legitimacy Kingdom, but they were primarily new faces who had been gathered together here. The losses had just been too great, so Heivia and Myonri stood out even though they had been with the group from the beginning.

“Hi, Lilim Gazette, Age 17. So you managed to survive too, huh?”

“...I’ve realized something. The trick to a happy life is to blend into the group and not stand out. I can’t believe you people who push your way to the front at times like that...”

The dark-eyed girl was apparently carrying another trauma with her. She was curled up on a folding chair with her arms around her raised knees.

Frolaytia left Heivia, stepped up onto the podium, and operated the projector

as she opened her mouth.

“We were already aware the Manhattan was a problem, but the situation has changed. This here is Melly Martini Extradry. She is the Martini Series tasked with defending New York and, hard as it is to believe, she is also the Object’s original Pilot Elite. As you can tell from the fact that she is here and Manhattan continues to move, it has left her control.”

When everyone’s gazes fell on her, the girl in a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper began to tremble for some reason. Unlike the previous potatoes, these were all new faces, so her tension value may have been reinitialized.

“Gh!?”

Melly seemed somehow excited and then her spine jerked backwards like a jolt of electricity was running down it.

“Ah, ghh... When I’m not linked with the Manhattan 000, this is really hard on my spine.”

She seemed to be putting up with something.

Also, her voice was no longer supported by the ring’s speakers. The ring was apparently a wireless accessory for the Manhattan 000 rather than a device linked directly to Capulet. It could function on its own in safe mode, but that only allowed the ring itself to move around slowly.

She took a deep breath to suppress something and then switched over to her serious mode. She folded up her arms and legs like a fetus on the giant ring and she held the thin game system to her chest.

“This probably goes without saying, but none of this would be a problem if I was capable of regaining control of Manhattan. That Idol Elite has completely taken it from me. 831. Sorry about that.”

An image of Manhattan was displayed on the wall, but it was very different from the streets Heivia and Myonri had run through. The electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon in Central Park had already been there, so this went well beyond that. Large cannons jutted out on either side like giant wings and cannons the size of normal Object main cannons were artlessly lined up

throughout the streets. Radars and camera lenses had also grown all over.

It now looked more like a weapon than a city.

“Those of us in the Martini Series pitted our opinions against Capulet’s to eliminate the errors and lead it to the optimal action,” said Wraith. “So keeping our losses to a minimum was seen as the best course of action. If we lacked our full numbers, we could not draw out 100% of our specs. ...But that innocent yet dangerous Idol Elite is different. She does not even need to converse with Capulet. She’s doing it all manually. And she’s easily producing more than 100% of the expected performance. Think of children working away with cooking implements in a cooking class only for the kind mother to gently confiscate the knife from her child’s hand.”

“A manual interface. ...AI is generally meant to support people’s tasks. So even if there is a fundamental difference in speed, a human should be able to perform any task an AI can. 299. Even if the Gatling 033 and the Manhattan 000 are different machines, if Capulet can do it, then so can the Idol Elite who looked after the directly-related Juliet. No, she might even be able to find a superior line. But even so, it’s hard to believe she can control such a massive system with keyboards...”

“If she did simply try to pit her opinions against Capulet’s, they would only trip each other up and she could not gain the initiative. Just like a cat that keeps getting into trouble no matter how many times you scold it. The Idol Elite was smart about that. AI is meant to support human work. So by controlling the Manhattan 000 all on her own, she isn’t leaving any room for Capulet and she is also displaying more interesting tasks so it will redirect its resources on its own.”

“She kindly confiscates it like a teacher and she tempts it away like a demon. 992.”

“Of course, this is all based on the extraordinary assumption that she can do a faster job without Capulet. What a pain. I’ve heard of AI making humans lazy, but I’d never heard of the opposite until now...”

“Anyway.” Frolaytia ended that line of discussion to reclaim control of the conversation. “Currently, the Manhattan is being controlled by the Elite in

charge of the Information Alliance Second Generation Rush. The relationship between Object and Elite is supposed to be one-to-one, meaning an Elite cannot control a different Object, but the software for these two apparently had related development histories. They're like a parent and a child. And those similarities in the design phase apparently mean Manhattan can be controlled with the Juliet and Capulet's shared control system."

"So which one is Oh Ho Ho really controlling? Capulet or Manhattan?"

"We should look at it as both, Mr. Foot Soldier who is only earnest when it comes to clinging stubbornly to life. She is redirecting Capulet's attention and then controlling Manhattan 000 as a weapon. Like someone avoiding the cat playing in their room while also working on some paperwork on the computer."

Heivia scrunched up his entire face in response to Wraith's words. He could not even imagine doing anything on that scale.

"So if cute little Capulet can do something, then the young G-cup wife can do an even better job? You can say that if you want, but is this really limited to just Manhattan anymore? We aren't going to have other metropolises transforming into humanoid robots and attacking us, are we?"

Frolaytia responded to Heivia's question by glancing over at the Information Alliance group. Wraith sighed quietly.

"This is only my intuition talking, but I think we can view this problem as exclusive to the Manhattan 000."

"Wait, so you have no proof?"

Frolaytia's voice lowered in tone, but Wraith was unfazed.

"That Idol Elite is using some other interesting material to redirect Capulet's focus, but she's mostly treating it like a nuisance. She's holding Capulet's reins so she can focus on controlling the Manhattan 000. That suggests she won't use the AI network to spread her rampage to the other side of the globe. The gears aren't set up that way."

"Also, there aren't many AI-controlled Objects. The Information Alliance is on the cutting edge there, but even we primarily use human hands to control Objects. It should be fine. It's all good."

Melly's words may have been accurate, but they did not seem to carry much weight. The black-uniformed girl must have been annoyed that even she had to risk her life based on speculation because she shrugged as she continued.

"As the Gatling 033's Pilot Elite, she's familiar with looking after Juliet which is directly related to Capulet. ...The system structure might be easier to picture if you focus on the obvious hardware of that one weapon instead of on the vague idea of the whole AI network."

The busty silver-haired commander winked at Wraith's words.

"Meaning?"

"Don't worry about anything else. Focus only on the Manhattan 000 problem."

Some images of the G-cup Idol Elite were added above the footage of Manhattan as a weapon. The boxes for personal information were blank because not even the Legitimacy Kingdom's intelligence department had been able to track that down. That showed just how much the Information Alliance treasured her. And that treatment would of course be the result of her extremely high level of skill.

"Her objective is unknown." Frolaytia used a baton to point at an image of the sexy idol's face. "But for some inexplicable reason, it was the death of Quenser Barbotage, a battlefield student from our maintenance battalion, that triggered this rampage. We can only speculate how that was processed in an enemy nation, but the problem is that the Idol Elite has left the military's chain of command and holds the power to destroy the world."

The Manhattan's attack range (based on the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon) was displayed around its location on the map in the ocean off of Central America. That covered the Information Alliance home country in eastern North America, the Capitalist Corporations home country to the west of that, and even some important Legitimacy Kingdom ports down in South America. Wherever it attacked, it was bound to drag the world into a long, drawn-out war that surpassed the usual clean wars.

"But the fact remains that we don't know what it is she wants to do. Does she simply want revenge against the person who killed Quenser, is she aiming more

broadly for the higher ups of the four world powers, or is she clinging to the desperate hope that she can resurrect Quenser Barbotage as a clone, robot, or AI program? Whether or not those would be possible, she can cause a lot of destruction in the attempt.”

“Have you predicted...how far she will go?” asked Myonri.

“What good is worrying about the worst case scenario when we have so little information? Would it help to speculate about an explosion large enough to hit us even if we fled the solar system?”

Hearing that girl being spoken about like a complete madwoman must have pushed her patience to the limit. Lendy Farolito, a silver-haired and brown-skinned commander with a different look to Frolaytia, silently raised her hand.

Once she had permission to speak, the Information Alliance commander opened her mouth.

“I will admit that the current situation is extremely dangerous. If that girl has a manual interface, she might very well be capable of distracting Capulet while manually controlling the Manhattan 000.”

Forcibly avoiding the points against her would have only earned suspicion.

To draw the enemy in and lead them in an advantageous direction, Lendy decided she needed to be careful what information she used here.

“But at the same time, she is the Gatling 033’s Elite and this is her first time using the Manhattan 000’s system. So she is not used to it. It might be similar, but the control system is not identical and she must make up for the discrepancies between the two Objects before she can control this one. She must focus on Capulet’s Juliet-related Object controls while also actually operating the manual controls, so it will be little different from climbing into a brand-new Object. You could say she is taking it for a test drive or breaking it in right now.”

That produced a groan not from Heivia but from the Object maintenance soldiers. They knew how much damage the Princess’s Baby Magnum had taken. That battle had been a series of miracles with her life at risk each and every instant, but for their opponent, it had been no more than a side job to learn the

ropes.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“So once she’s done breaking it in, the world will truly be exposed to Manhattan’s fury?”

“That could be in a few days or a few minutes for all I know. But she is not a dangerous element that is plotting to overthrow the world and she is not a cultist who believes in some apocalyptic theory. That I can promise you.” Even after all this, Lendy still intended to defend the Idol Elite. “I assume her actions here are impulsive in nature, so she likely has no concrete objective in mind. If anything, I think we should view this as the result of provocation by Skuld Silent-Third, that serial killer released by the Faith Organization.”

“And?”

Frolaytia remained coolheaded. She would use whatever she could, but she would throw out whatever she could not. So she would not necessarily flatly reject something she emotionally agreed with.

“As I said, I admit this is extremely dangerous. And with that in mind, we need to keep her desire for revenge above a certain level. Even if that means intentionally propping it up.”

“W-wait, she has her finger on a trigger that could destroy the world at any moment!” protested Heivia. “Didn’t we say she’s on a rampage that could start a war between the four world powers!?”

“That is my point.” Lendy enunciated each word carefully. “Her head is boiling over with an impulsive desire for revenge, but once she calms down, she will realize what it is she has done. And she will realize that the destructive power she has obtained cannot change the cold reality of the situation. Humans are most dangerous in the instant mania is replaced by depression. To prevent her from suddenly and utterly losing control, I believe we must keep her psyche at a certain level.”

Part 4

She was in a daze.

The Information Alliance Idol Elite known as Oh Ho Ho was not inside a cockpit surrounded by strange machinery. She was in Midtown, Manhattan, New York. Specifically, she was in the center of Times Square which was one of the biggest tourist locations.

Time had stopped.

That was likely one of Manhattan's abilities. All the people in the square were closed in 3m clear cubes with their looks of shock frozen on their faces. That they still held their smartphones with the lenses pointed outward may have been their Information Alliance-ness showing through.

The scenery had greatly changed. Giant clear ivy was tangled tightly around the outside of the towering skyscrapers to thoroughly reinforce them so they would not collapse from the movements of the world's largest Object. They were harder than steel beams, more flexible than muscles, and designed to allow any external force to escape safely.

Was this heaven or hell?

Either way, the ringlet curls girl spoke weakly in that strange and unfamiliar world.

"Now I've done it..."

The extremely bitter and heavy feeling she felt may have been similar to the "sage time" whispered of on the internet.

No one responded to her, of course. Oh Ho Ho thought about the situation while touching the cold surface of a giant die containing a mother protecting a stroller.



She hated it.

She hated the world beyond all measure.

...But what exactly was she supposed to do now? It was clear as day that nothing she did now would bring Quenser back. For the Oh Ho Ho who performed as the G-cup top idol using the Information Alliance's 3D modeling, perfectly recreating an individual using AI, robots, clones, virtual reality, or other methods seemed plausible enough, but none of those would *really* be him. She recalled the 4m G-cup idol she had been operating earlier. It simply was not the same. She wanted to see Quenser again. That was a grand and emotional task, but asking the adults for the highest quality body pillow made from all sorts of cutting-edge technology was not what she wanted.

In fact...

(Th-the adults must be working hard to figure out why I went nuts... O-ohhh, it's so embarrassing!! Are they giving out all my information!? Are they posting blown-up pictures of me on the briefing room screen!?)

In addition to her personal feelings as a teenage girl, this was also dangerous for her side job as an idol.

Her entire face grew bright red, but she could not turn back time. She hoped the Information Alliance would do its things and seal away all that information as national secrets.

"...Sigh."

Staying here would accomplish nothing. But going elsewhere would not change anything either.

Her small stomach growled inside the silence of a city devoid of human voices. She wondered if feeling hungry like normal was a good sign. She was surprisingly resilient to stress, so she looked around and found she would have a hard time even finding a burger with everyone enclosed in resin. It looked like she would have to wander around in search of a bread vending machine or something. And it would have to be one that accepted the e-money from a smartphone or card. As a top-level Pilot Elite and a top idol, Oh Ho Ho was not the type to walk around with change. Even tips were paid electronically these

days.

But then one piece of clear ivy smoothly bent over to her. It was thicker than her arm and the tip opened in front of her face like a beautiful flower made of crystal. Something like sticky nectar dripped out. The Manhattan 000 was supposedly being controlled by Oh Ho Ho via countless keyboards, but when she got distracted, Capulet would move in to fill the gap.

AI was meant to support human work. When she came to a stop, Capulet moved its resources back in.

Oh Ho Ho gave the dripping clear liquid a very troubled look.

“...Are you telling me to eat that?”

Her voiced question received no response.

She had no idea how much it was all linked, but as her doubts grew, the presence of the AI network also grew. It was like a GPS navigation app that mistakenly thought the user was lost and provided predictive route popups and control tip popups when they had only stopped in front of a vending machine to take a break.

Oh Ho Ho hesitantly scooped some up on her special suit's fingertip, moved her mouth in hesitation, and finally squeezed her eyes shut and stuck her finger in her mouth. It was unexpectedly sweet and thick. It reminded her of a diet drink that was meant to fill the stomach. She used one hand to brush her hair off of her cheek like she was using a park water fountain and she stuck her tongue out toward the clear flower for more of the mystery health food.

“Nn...gulp. Gulp, gulp.”

It did not seem harmful.

As a Pilot Elite, she was used to the stimulation of many different chemicals on her tongue, so she had decent instincts for such things. If it was dangerous, she would have known as soon as it touched the tip of her tongue.

“Pwah. Hmm, I would get tired of this pretty quickly...”

Her comment was answered by more and more ivy approaching in much the same way. The diet drink may have had coffee and yogurt flavors, but she

slapped them aside. She did not like how they kept pushing up toward her nose and blocking her vision, like people handing out tissues on the roadside or full screen smartphone ads.

It was time to drive them away.

She generally used a console, but she did have an emergency method. She used a one-handed wireless keyboard that resembled a numeric keypad to send the world's ten toughest unsolved problems toward Capulet and redirect its resources there.

(Phew...)

Once the biological desire for food was met (albeit in an unconventional manner), her thoughts could face the realistic problem. In that utterly silent city, Oh Ho Ho returned to a work van parked on the curb in Times Square. The windowless back space contained a single seat surrounded by keyboards and it was normally used as a mobile console room for remotely controlling the powered suit, but that had changed.

It was now an indirect cockpit for fully controlling the Manhattan 000, the world's largest Object. Melly Martini Extradry and the thousands of other Martinis around the world did not matter. Just by moving her fingers and hitting those countless keys, she could redirect Capulet's attention elsewhere and control the Manhattan 000 herself. That small space had to be far more valuable than a lunar villa.

But Oh Ho Ho ignored the traffic laws and hopped into the driver's seat which had no connection to the Object. Clear ivy was anchoring the van to the ground, so she used the one-handed wireless keyboard to send the bare minimum of commands needed to have that ivy retract, freeing the van. After lowering the seat as far as it would go so her feet reached the pedals, she grabbed the steering wheel. It was an electric van with an automatic transmission, so it did not feel like operating a real vehicle. It felt more like a go-kart at a run-down amusement park.

She could have changed the traffic lights as she pleased, but with no one else around, there was no need to obey the lights in the first place. This was another of the Manhattan 000's abilities. She skillfully avoided the abandoned vehicles

and the people encased in cubes as she made her way toward Columbia University.

She had no idea how much hardware had been linked together to create Capulet or how much processing power it had, but after contacting it, she had realized it was more like a cat than a dog. Telling it to not scratch the walls would only create a confrontation that wore them both down, so it was more efficient to approve of the action while guiding it in a better direction, such as attaching packing tape to the wall or buying a scratching board. That was a lot like Juliet which she was quite familiar with. But even with that mutual contact with the AI network that occasionally attempted to interfere, she could not escape the stifling sense of loneliness.

(Rationally thinking, I can't force the 10 million people in Manhattan to go along with my selfishness.)

The work van was nothing compared to a 20,000 meter monster. She easily operated the steering wheel to drive the van through silent Manhattan while she lost herself in thought. As she drove down Broadway to approach her goal, she saw the remains of large vehicles and unmanned Bullmites. It was the aftermath of the previous fighting.

Some of them were still functioning, so two or three Bullmites ran alongside the work van.

After arriving at Columbia University accompanied by her unmanned bodyguards, Oh Ho Ho ignored the no parking sign and stopped the van right in front of the university. She got out and approached the second gym and the toppled trees around it. The serverless but coordinated Bullmites followed her.

Finding the person she wanted was not easy.

She had done this herself and should have known the exact location, but it all seemed different when seeing it for herself.

The area was full of clear cubes. It was like cutting open the belly of a giant fish full of eggs. An explosion of her personal emotions had caused all of this. She had trapped them and sealed them away. The number of cubes packing the gym made her feel nauseous, but she eventually found the one she was looking for.

“...Father...”

He was a sickly-looking middle-aged man with a beard.

Even with all this going on...no, because all of this was going on, he had been using his smartphone's voice recorder to leave a record of what was happening when his time was frozen. He had carelessly not set the screen to shut off after a few minutes. The background photo of the whole family smiling together was visible through the translucent window.

It was not the top-level Pilot Elite or international top idol he had been trying to protect. He had been focused on a completely different side of her.

Quenser Barbotage was no more.

But that did not mean she could throw everything else into the flames.

She placed her palm on the cold cube, squeezed her eyes shut, and thought. She had already made an unforgivable mistake, but what should she do even so?

If she wanted to have her revenge, she could do it.

She could kill the person who actually did it. She could request a list of everyone pulling the strings and profiting from it behind the scenes and reduce every last one of them to ashes. She could even send the responsibility for the wars and military actions back to the world's safe countries which enjoyed peace and tranquility.

But. However.

Was that really what she *should* do?

“...I need to surrender...”

Finally, Oh Ho Ho forced the words from her small mouth.

“That would be the fastest way to resolve all of the issues surrounding Manhattan. I did all this without thinking, but it is true I separated the possibly-dangerous Martinis from Manhattan. If I return this to the Information Alliance, it should resolve the original problem.”

That decision may have been correct.

It may have been the best available choice in the world created by her decisively incorrect choice.

But there was no guarantee everyone else would also make the right decision.

An alarm rang at the same frequency as a baby's crying to most effectively draw people's attention to their eardrums. All of the phones held by the people inside the cubes lit up at once, sending the emergency information into Oh Ho Ho's field of vision.

It was not that something had been found.

Quite the opposite. More and more screens were going dark. The unmanned drones automatically monitoring the ocean around the Manhattan 000 were being shot down by someone. A great threat was approaching. And the fact that she could not see what it was only made it feel more threatening.

"What is this...?"

Part 5

Shortly before that...

“Uuh...bh...”

Rigas Blackpassion uttered a groan that carried the sticky flavor of blood. The middle-aged man was a Captain in the Capitalist Corporations and the commander of a submarine, but he was now so badly injured it was hard to tell whether he was the mummy man in the center or all the medical equipment surrounding that. It was hard to believe he was still alive. Technically speaking, Frolaytia had killed him over and over only to forcibly resurrect him once more, but for now, he was still alive.

A messenger had arrived for him.

It was a crane fly drone that could freely move in any direction by turning its six wings. The collection of delicate machinery was equipped with a camera and microphone and it produced a sound quieter than a fan as it hovered near the window.

Someone spoke through the machine.

“Hello, Captain. Your attempt to trigger emergency demand using the Manhattan has failed.”

“...Levert? Any chance of rescuing me?”

“We have made some attempts through diplomatic routes, but it does not look promising. The Manhattan issue is so large that all of our contacts are putting the requests off until later.”

“Then what is this? Even if you supply me with additional equipment, I can no longer move.”

“I will admit you are in a worse state than I expected, but that leaves us with only one option.”

There was not a hint of disappointment in that machine-like voice. And the young man's voice continued.

"Captain, if you cannot return to your duties, I would like for you to transfer your authority."

"..."

"If you could escape under your own power or had died after intense torture, this would not have been necessary. But unfortunately, you still live and remain in an enemy nation's hands. For the largescale operation we are about to begin, we require the signatures of the operation commanders for all the naval ports on the west coast. Captain, the delay of your authorization is hindering the entire operation. Even if it must be done via camera, I will see this through. Make your decision before it is too late."

There was no hesitation there.

Giant gears were crushing an individual life.

The mummy man gave a snort of laughter.

"I must know. ...What will happen to my family?"

"Our military and the PMC's sponsors promise to support them in every way. It might be suicide, but your action here is also a high-level military action. Thus, it qualifies for the special high payout life insurance policy you signed up for in place of a bereaved family pension."

"That is fine then."

"I have prepared the tool. Just like before, it contains two rounds to ensure you will succeed even if your hand is shaking. I also have the '12 Highland you enjoyed drinking so much. Single malt."

The drone contained an assassination handgun small enough to fit in the palm of his hand and a glass container only a bit larger than a vial of eye drops. Rigas twirled the amber-colored liquid around, removed the cap, and drank it.

"What I am about to say does not need to be recorded. Think of it as the ramblings of a drunk."

"Very well."

“You are a good soldier. Do not let yourself turn out like me, Levert.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot promise you that. You are already my role model, Captain.”

A slight smile appeared on the mummy man’s lips.

And a dry sound rang out.

The drone swiftly left from the window before the shocked military doctors could open the curtain partition around the bed. There was no need to speak through the speaker since there was no one to hear it, but whoever-it-was did so anyway.

“A decisive judgment with no hesitation whatsoever. A truly wonderful end.”

Another dark flame.

The world seemed to solidify and create only the worst of things.

“The transfer of authority is confirmed. We now have authorization from the commanders of every west coast naval base. Notify every Object already waiting in the Bermuda region of ocean. It is time for an all-out attack on the Manhattan.”

Part 6

The Legitimacy Kingdom military in that area of sea quickly learned of the “change”.

When Frolaytia received word from a military doctor, she clapped her hands in the briefing room to gather everyone’s attention.

“Rigas Blackpassion has committed suicide. At the same time, all of the Capitalist Corporations Objects in the area appear to have begun moving. That was some kind of trigger, dammit!!”

Little Wraith interrupted there.

“I question whether they really intend to win. The Capitalist Corporations has the Cayman Islands in the Central American ocean. Their wealthy hide their ugly sides by keeping their money there, so they cannot have the islands destroyed before they can withdraw their electronic money from their secret bank accounts.”

The ocean map projected on the wall was greatly rewritten. It had previously shown the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance fleet centered on the Baby Magnum staring down the Information Alliance’s Manhattan, but now a large Capitalist Corporations unit arrived from the side.

The operator raised her voice in a shout.

“I cannot get an accurate number thanks to their deceptive actions, but there have to be 20 to 30 in all! And they are all cutting-edge Second Generations!! Did they send in every one of the naval specialists guarding their home country on the west coast!?”

“...This will end the same way regardless. 760.”

That quiet comment came from the Melly Martini Extradry, the brown girl who wore a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper and whose butt

was contained inside the swim ring. As its original owner, she had to know the Manhattan's specs better than anyone.

Even with Frolaytia's cold gaze on her, she moved carefully to avoid an explosion in her spine that was not receiving appropriate support from the ring that was only barely moving in its safe mode.

"That Idol Elite is not part of the Martini Series. If she can manually draw out more than 100% of its specs without relying on Capulet, not even 100 traditional Objects would be able to defeat her. Normal Objects would have to desperately protect the reactor at their core, but the Manhattan 000 is an extraordinary machine that does not have to worry about its reactors. 350. It does use the same reactors, but its entire concept as a weapon is different. And if it starts to move in ways not even we are familiar with, there is no predicting how far it can go."

It happened a moment later.

The briefing room was supposedly surrounded by thick steel on all sides, but it was filled with a pure white flash of light. It took Heivia a few seconds to realize something had happened on the ocean being shown via projector. The footage was supposedly being corrected in real-time, yet it was still this bad. If they had actually been there, they might have gone blind.

The female operator shouted a report from her distant station.

"The Manhattan has begun to move. It was the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon!!"

"Damn, be on the lookout for artificial weather changes. Another major storm is coming!"

【マンハッタン000】
MANHATTAN000

全長…20000メートル以上(概算。実態把握不能)

最高速度…時速750km

装甲…規格外タマネギ装甲+人工植物質外装補強材
(概算。実態把握不能)

用途…「情報同盟」本国最終防衛兵器

分類…海戦専用第二世代

運用者…「情報同盟」

仕様…高圧水流推進+極微小気泡式水中抵抗減衰システム

主砲…電磁投擲動力炉砲含む44種

副砲…下位安定式プラズマ砲、レーザービーム、連速ビーム、
レールガン、コイルガンなど(概算。実態把握不能)

コードネーム…マンハッタン(混乱下の『正統王国』では暫定でしかない)
「情報同盟」公式にはマンハッタン000

メインカラーリング…グレー

MANHATTAN000

And once the footage on the wall reached their retinas once more, it showed hell itself.

Manhattan had finally begun to move as an Object of more than 20,000 meters.

First, the central electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon made a general strike which covered a radius of a few dozen kilometers. That dented in the surfaces of the Capitalist Corporations Objects. Once the turkeys had briefly stopped moving, the other cannons opened fire while spread out on either side like wings.

There were railguns, laser beams, coilguns, rapid-fire beam cannons, and low-stability plasma cannons.

There was no grand logic or system to it.

The weapons were simply fired with extraordinary power. As an extension of the most basic of strategies, great firepower was used to wear down the enemy force. Like an all-star pro baseball team hitting homerun after homerun against a quickly-gathered team of amateur boys.

Everyone knew the rules, so anyone could produce this same result if they did the same thing, right? It seemed to display that kind of confidence.

The Capitalist Corporations had supposedly sent in their greatest specialists.

The Offensive Mine, the Octoblade, and the Snipe. They were the top of the pyramid and they directly defended the home country of a world power. There were no greater warriors on the sea. It was doubtful whether Heivia's group could have defeated any one of them.

Yet it was as easy as taking candy from a baby.

They desperately returned fire with laser beams and low-stability plasma cannons, but as Oh Ho Ho operated Manhattan, she sometimes used low-stability plasma blasts to bend the path of a shot and sometimes swung that giant form to left or right to just barely dodge them. It was like a surfer riding a wave or like a bullfighter parrying a charging bull. Of course, all that moving around could not dodge laser beams, but she used the plasma "deflections" for that. The movements were so nimble they seemed to have no weight behind

them. Such a large mass was being simultaneously attacked from multiple directions, but instead of letting thick armor deflect it, she did not allow any hits at all. That was why it looked so absurd and filled all who saw it with terror.

The way she surfed quickly back and forth while taking down the enemy with rapid-fire shots was far more polished than when Melly had worked with Capulet to destroy the five Faith Organization Second Generations. And it looked somehow familiar to Heivia.

Yes, it was a lot like the Rush's movements.

Also, the freedom of movement seemed to gradually rise with time.

"Dozens? No, hundreds!? How many reactors would it need to force its way through those kinds of actions!?"

"It was plenty shocking and more than enough of a threat for her to move the Manhattan 000 at all by considering the AI network's methods but using her own manual methods...but that Idol Elite is producing results that easily surpass 100% of the design specs while also distracting Capulet. This is more than I ever imagined."

Wraith sounded annoyed but also awed.

"She would never hold back against a foreign invasion," said silver-haired and brown-skinned Lendy Farolito. "Plus, she has 10 million people, including her father, onboard with her. She will go all out to shake free of every last spark if it is to protect those civilians."

"She's the one that got them in this mess to begin with!!"

"That may be why she's so intent on protecting them." Myonri sounded dazed too. "N-now I'm wondering how the Princess managed to fight... The Manhattan is easily winning against 20 or 30 naval experts, but she fought it on her own to rescue us, didn't she?"

That was answered by the Princess who was walking past the briefing room while leaning on the old maintenance lady's shoulder. Due to exhaustion, sweat was visible on her doll-like face and her blonde hair was plastered to her cheeks.

She looked like a girl who had gotten up while she had a cold. The beads of sweat gave off the sweet smell of a girl while the Princess shared her information.

“It wasn’t too difficult. First, I didn’t have to worry about winning. I was only stalling for time, so I could focus on dodging. But the second reason was more important: no matter how extraordinary the Manhattan is, it’s still that loathsome Oh Ho Ho piloting it. It was fortunate I clashed with her in the Oceania District. I already knew the small idiosyncrasies of her movements.”

Just as Oh Ho Ho had learned Capulet’s small idiosyncrasies through Juliet, the Princess had not forgotten Oh Oh Ho’s small idiosyncrasies.

Everyone there could tell it was not as simple as she made it out to be.

Even if every one of the potatoes there was given a cutting-edge Second Generation Object designed to match them individually and developed a plan to attack Manhattan with 1000 Objects at once, not one of them would have agreed to stand before that monster.

But she had done it. She had gone that far, yet there was a life they had failed to save.

Quenser Barbotage had died.

The Princess was too exhausted to brush her bangs aside, but she still made a clear statement while the survivors like Heivia and Myonri watched her.

“...Quenser’s death is a sad thing.”

It was not that she was not shaken.

It was not that she had not been tempted.

“But I refuse to let her start a war over that. I will not let any of the survivors distort Quenser’s death for their own convenience.”

When he heard her perfect answer, Heivia found he could not look her straight in the eye. Did the Princess understand what his action meant? That delinquent noble had been unable to accept his awful friend’s death like that.

Regardless, the situation was underway.

Frolaytia thought with her long, narrow *kiseru* in her mouth, and then...

“Since the maintenance chief is away from her post, can I assume the Baby Magnum is back in working order? Then I have new orders for you, Princess. Fight. Please. We too will join the fight soon.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous,” said Heivia. “You mean we’re going out there to get hit by stray shells? Can’t we just let those Capitalist Corporations idiots get destroyed on their own!?”

“Look at this way: we can take advantage of this confusion. We have better odds than if we resume throwing stones after this is over. Do that and it will just lock onto us with pinpoint accuracy.”

Frolaytia cut off the footage filled with bright lights and deafening roars and instead focused on the dizzying changes on the naval map.

“As you know, the Manhattan is an extraordinary Object with a great number of reactors. And the Idol Elite herself is incredible too, so we can’t hope for the weapon to be too much for her to fully handle.”

“ ... ”

“Since its reactors are as numerous as weeds, it is likely that targeting and destroying a reactor will not stop it like we are used to in anti-Object combat. ... With that much firepower, it is possible an explosion at one location could start a chain reaction that causes much greater damage, but I doubt that is realistic. Even if they are packed in boxes, there are 10 million civilians onboard if we include the visitors. I have not lost enough of my morals to forget that fact and attempt to sink it.”

“We can’t do this and we can’t do that. Then what are we supposed to do?” asked Heivia.

“Melly Martini Extradry. She is our greatest key.” Frolaytia exhaled sweet pipe smoke in an apparent attempt to calm herself. “Manhattan should be under her control, but that Information Alliance Idol Elite has taken full authority of Manhattan through pure manual control and she is operating it as a weapon. She is using keyboards rather than the original control system. Oh Ho Ho only knows the online system viewed through a screen, so she may not understand

the physical design diagrams. Do you see how that could present an opportunity?”

“You mean...” said short Myonri. “Since that Idol Elite is controlling Manhattan herself while keeping Capulet away like a kitten, she might not be in the actual cockpit...? She doesn’t know where it is, so she’s intervening through a cyber-attack opening? And so she might be exposed in an apartment or car somewhere in the city of Manhattan?”

“Manhattan is not allowing a single lucky hit through, but that may be driven by more than simple philanthropy. She can’t have a stray shot fall into the city and reduce her to ashes.”

In other words...

Looking at it in reverse...

“If we knew where exactly the Idol Elite was located, we could make a counterattack. We would only need to crush that single point while leaving Manhattan as a whole intact.”

“You-...!?”

Lendy started to yell something, but she ultimately held her tongue with a bitter look on her face. She knew nothing she said here would get through to them.

Frolaytia glanced over to observe Lendy’s actions as she continued.

“The Baby Magnum will head back out and draw Manhattan’s attention. Meanwhile, our real goal is searching for the Idol Elite’s location. Fortunately, this incident seems to have woken up the peace-dulled higher ups in the safe countries. They’ve lent us a relic of an older age.”

“What kind of relic?”

“A Mobus Variant. Simply put, a laser sniping system is sent into satellite orbit, it circles the earth a few times to stabilize its orbit, and then it fires on a certain point on the surface. Shockingly, it is equipped with an atomic battery. The victory of Objects eliminated nuclear weapons from the world, but as long as it isn’t ‘directly’ used, it apparently doesn’t violate the treaties.” The busy

silver-haired commander crossed her arms such that they pushed up her large breasts. “We use that to fire a laser down from the heavens to eliminate the Idol Elite. It moves at the speed of light. The overall power might seem insufficient in this age of Objects, but its speed can’t be beat. It would be one thing if she was in a shelter or a tunnel, but there is no better assassination method for directly targeting someone. It will all fall apart if she predicts the location of this game piece, but if she doesn’t know about it, not even she can dodge it. By the time she notices, she and the piloting equipment will have been vaporized.”

If Oh Ho Ho had known Manhattan’s layout and had been inside the proper cockpit covered in thick, nuke-resistant armor, there would be nothing they could do.

Although that would have changed their respective positions for better or for worse.

“But how do we get that information? You make it sound like spying from a satellite won’t be enough.”

“If the Idol Elite is in the subway tunnels or inside a building, we cannot rely on overhead surveillance. The people packed in resin boxes still have body heat, after all.”

“Surely you aren’t telling us to climb back onto that monster,” said Heivia. “Just to be clear, that wouldn’t be possible even if you made a million clones of me for extra lives.”

“You don’t need to do that,” casually said Frolaytia. “Because someone has already gotten onboard. Or should I say, someone never escaped.”

“...Wait. You’re kidding, right?”

Come to think of it, he had only been told about his Legitimacy Kingdom group and Wraith’s Information Alliance group being collected. But nothing had ever been said about the Faith Organization.

“Skuld Silent-Third.”

Frolaytia Capistrano was another person familiar with the nightmare sealed away within the Madagascar Report. She knew this was dangerous enough to

leave the category of war altogether, but she still made the suggestion.

“She remains hidden in Manhattan and we have managed to contact her. ... This truly is a worst case scenario, but it looks like our only option is to trust a report from that serial killer.”

Part 7

It was less exciting than expected.

That was Skuld Silent-Third's honest opinion about being left alone in Manhattan. Her plan had been to remain in the center of the city while pretending to be defeated and then send the Manhattan after the Legitimacy Kingdom as they desperately attempted to confirm her death. Once the ocean was littered with wreckage, corpses, and other detritus, she could steal a functioning vehicle and drift through the ocean. In the best case, she had hoped to slip out from under the Faith Organization's watchful eye, but...

(Hmm, they recovered more quickly than I expected. Restarting all that from here might be difficult.)

The combat mobility had shaken her enough for gravity to lose its hold on her, but that had stopped for the moment.

While rage boiled within the Idol Elite, she had been able to manipulate that girl who controlled the Manhattan, so Skuld would be in trouble if the girl calmed down.

Of course, not even Skuld could directly pilot the Manhattan. She needed the Idol Elite to put in the effort of her own volition. Threatening her would be meaningless. If this conflict ended with the girl's death, the Capulet AI Network would return to normal. And then Skuld would be immediately killed as an enemy of the Information Alliance.

(Should I kill her father, Royce, to shake her again? No, doing the same thing again would be boring...)

The clear cubes visible here and there contained Manhattan residents with carefree looks on their faces. Skuld had tried picking up a metal pipe and hitting them, but it had been no use. Instead of being solid, they were springy, like rubber or gelatin. Plus, these protective shields were meant to endure the

combat mobility of the world's largest Object. Human hands would not be enough to break through.

That meant she would have trouble killing Royce if she tried. And if she viewed the cubes like Object armor, not even her bombs were likely to work.

Unless she caused some confusion here, she was like a bird in cage while on Manhattan. First of all, the extraordinary Object's warning system prevented her from escaping and, even if she did escape into the ocean, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization's naval forces were waiting.

(What should I do...?)

She rubbed her fingertips across her slender chin.

(Which option would be the most fun?)

That was her priority, not her life.

And after a lot of thinking, the twintail girl arrived at a conclusion.

She fished through the equipment of one of the many dead Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and grabbed the radio.

"I guess I'll contact the Legitimacy Kingdom and save the world! After I do that, I can figure out what to do next!!"

Part 8

“Shit!!”

Once she was guided from the briefing room to a guest room, silver-haired and brown-skinned Lendy Farolito spat out a curse.

The Manhattan 000 could not be destroyed with direct firepower, so they were going to pinpoint target the out-of-control Pilot Elite. It made sense, but she could not allow it. She wanted to stop it however she could, but she lacked the actual ability to do so. Even now, there would be two muscular guards right outside the door. Her weapons had been confiscated, so she could not even eliminate those two. She knew the situation was extremely pressing, but she could not find anything to do.

Except...

“...”

Once she judged the timing was right, Lendy reached inside her uniform’s short skirt. She had had a good reason for altering her electronic medical records and implanting an unnecessary metal bolt inside her body to have an excuse when a metal detector went off. She had more than 10 components hidden inside her uniform and underwear so they would slip through a search. Once she assembled them, she had a radio smaller than a pack of cigarettes. The antenna was larger than the rest of the device because it used satellite phone technology. It was originally so she could call for rescue. It could make a call from anywhere on the planet, but to give it such a small size, it could only be used for 3 minutes. She could only give a short warning to the Pilot Elite on the distant Manhattan. Also, the Legitimacy Kingdom was not dumb. Once they detected a signal coming from here, they were sure to restrain Lendy immediately. She would only have one shot at this. One shot with the silver bullet known as information.

She did not care if she was arrested and court martialed. She was willing to live out her life in an enemy nation's prison or even be shot on the spot.

She had to think.

When, where, and what should she transmit? How she used this one silver bullet could mean the life or death of that girl.

And just before she made up her mind...

"...?"

Lendy raised her beautiful face. Something was not right. As a soldier, she was fairly sensitive to people's presences, but the pressure from beyond the door had vanished. She stuck the rescue radio in her pocket and cautiously approached the metal door.

She tried silently opening it and found both guards collapsed on the floor.

Lendy had not lived a normal enough life to immediately scream. She quietly crouched down and checked on the corpses. Countless screws, nails, and other fragments had pierced the front of their bulletproof vests. Those were used to increase the power of explosions, not gunfire. Still crouched down, she looked up and saw the knob of the nearest waterproof door had also been sliced off with great firepower. But she had not heard anything like an explosion. Nor had she heard any screams or shouts from the two professional guards.

Was the mysterious explosion the work of a combat engineer who specialized in that sort of thing?

A certain individual's face flashed through her mind, but...

(No, Skuld Silent-Third should be on the Manhattan right now.)

Then who else could it be?

Whose example had that serial killer been following when she began using plastic explosives for her killing? Who had originally wielded the Legitimacy Kingdom military explosive known as Hand Axe?

Who was that complete amateur who still managed to destroy the occasional Object and had won that girl's heart with that unique ability?

“Hi.”

When she heard that sudden voice, Lendy grabbed a carbine from one of the corpses and quickly turned around to find someone standing there.

This was completely unexpected.

She kept the gun aimed at him while her instincts told her this was not enough. This person had killed the two heavily-equipped guards without even giving them a chance to cry out.

In that seemingly perfect yet imperfect state, the silver-haired and brown-skinned commander asked a question.

“Who...are you?”

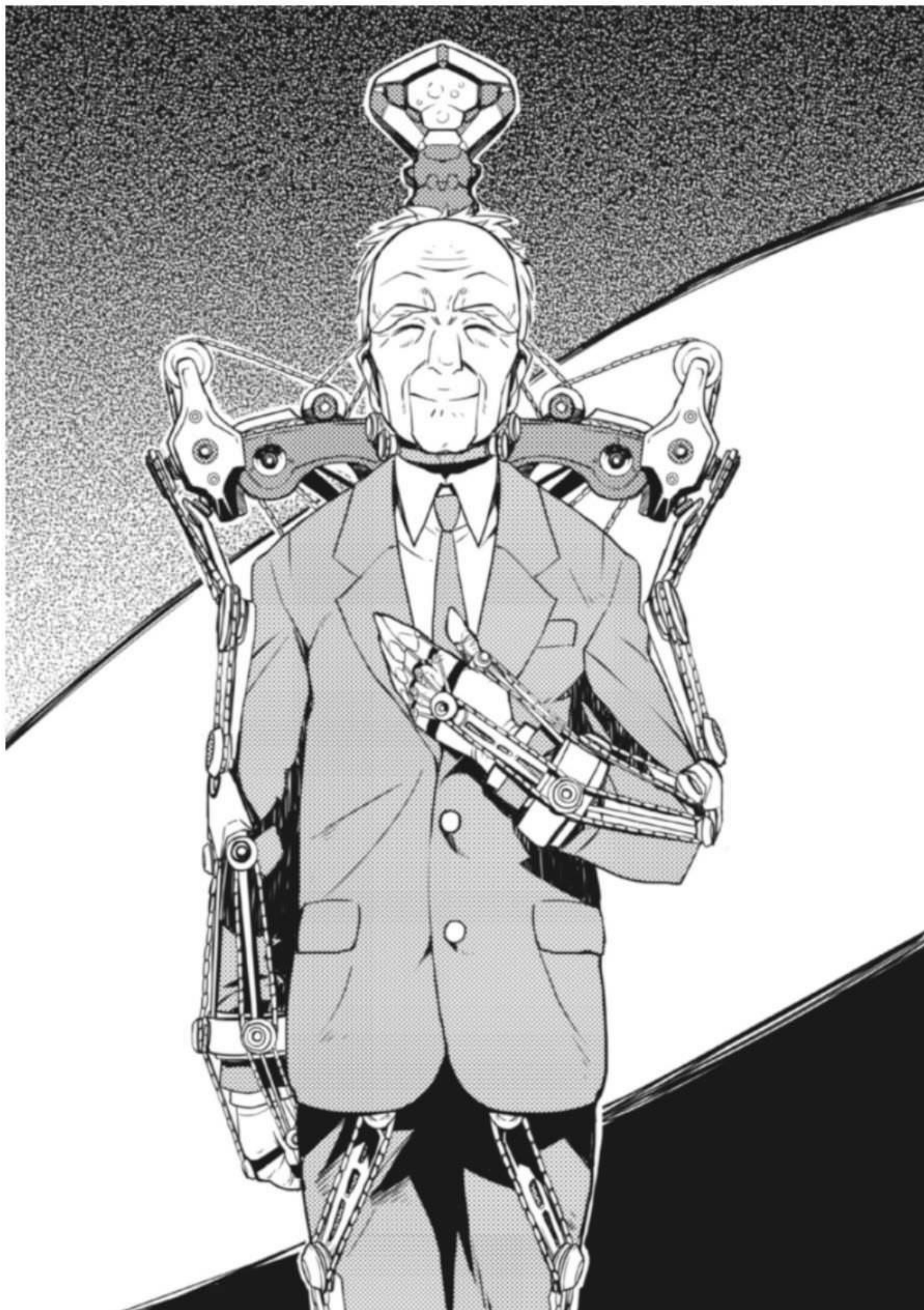
That was the issue.

Even if they were an enemy, she would not have sounded so confused if she had recognized them.

Lendy Farolito had no idea whatsoever who this person was.

“Module Quenser,” whispered the mystery man.

He must not have been the type to show off with his clothing. The gray-haired man of at least 70 wore a cheap gray suit that could be bought anywhere. But he wore something else on his back. ...What was it? It looked something like a cross...but, no. It was a sword. He was equipped with a unit that resembled a sheathed double-edged sword. The kind of chains seen on bicycles or chainsaws extended from the sword and attached to gears on his shoulders, elbows, wrists, thighs, knees, and ankles. All of the chains glittered green like emerald.



But the old man himself was even stranger. The look on his face was innocent. It was a childlike expression that seemed entirely removed from worldly interests.

“It is very user-friendly, but it leaves a lot of openings when breaching a single point.”

Asking further seemed pointless.

Lendy placed her finger on the trigger, but then the old man moved without warning.

His movements did not seem so much fast as oddly timed.

The green chains produced a disconcerting sound of rapid rotation. Just as Lendy noticed that, he approached like the wind, grabbed the carbine, lifted it straight up, and pressed his other hand against the silver-haired, brown-skinned commander's throat. Was he trying to strangle her or break her neck?

“Module Skuld. ...Yes, this is much easier to use here.”

It seemed very much like a prototype. It was incredible the rapidly-rotating chains did not catch on his hair, skin, or suit. And strangely, the wrinkly old man's movements were oddly girly. He could have played a female role in the Island Nation's *kabuki*.

Or did that have something to do with the name he had mentioned?

“So...”

The trembling of her brown throat let her feel the sweaty hand pressed against it.

“Does that sword-like...thing use the chains to reproduce the behavior of a specific individual? Does it use their motion data to support your own actions with the chains? But I doubt nothing more than chains and gears could protect your body's joints.”

“We are not trying to do it all with just that. Everyone's skeletons and muscles are the same, yet successful people's movements can be classified into their respective fields. Why is that?”

“ ... ”

“What matters is the gait and center of gravity used by the individual. So more than just the simple movements, their individual rhythms form their internal clock which alters them on the inside. And people face the general concept of time based on the planet’s rotation and revolution. Ascend to those heights, and you can obtain it. They say different people see the world differently, and I could not agree more.”

Was the person controlling the machine, or vice-versa?

Lendy belonged to the Information Alliance, but even she found it odd to see an obvious contraption externally manipulating the movements of his limbs.

“We of the Faith Organization stand opposite of you in the Information Alliance. We do not treat the Pilot Elites as a component of the giant military system known as an Object. In fact, we look for the charisma of a strategist or commander in an exceptional individual person and we focus on drawing out their individuality and characteristics as much as possible. Although since that involves things like synesthesia and perfect pitch, you outsiders sometimes misinterpret it as esper research.”

“Faith...?”

“Oh, did I forget to introduce myself? I am Tyrfin Boilermaker. Back home, I am known as the Venerable Elder. I am really not worth introducing, but I stand on the side of good. Of course, my identity is not worth hiding either.”

He was even higher ranked than the Founders. In Legitimacy Kingdom terms, he was a major king. In Capitalist Corporations terms, he was the president of a major conglomerate or international corporation.

“It could be Sladder Honeysuckle, Putana Highball, Mariydi Whitewitch, or even the rumored Nyarlathotep. Oh, excuse me. I was not trying to say we have no interest in the Information Alliance’s people. At any rate, we focus on the body and mind of individual humans. So we gather data on enemy and ally strategists and commanders and then attempt to faithfully reproduce them or escalate them further. It should be no surprise that we would be researching such things.”

In other words, this old man was both a single person and multiple people.

He could freely switch between different strategists and commanders. Did he have hundreds, thousands, even more? He might as well have had countless monsters waiting behind him.

“Since you attacked me – part of the Information Alliance minority – instead of the Legitimacy Kingdom majority, does this have to do with the Manhattan 000?”

“Attack you? Perish the thought.”

He gave a bright smile that did not match his age at all.

He then spread his arms and casually waved his hands which could kill at any moment.

“I have a merciful heart, so if I intended to kill you, I would have done so before you even knew I was here. With a metal jet, I could painlessly slice through your heart from the other side of the wall. To be honest, I want you to work even harder. That is why I arrived to set you free. Only because I was already here, though.”

“Work...harder?”

“I mean, it looks like the Legitimacy Kingdom might succeed.” He sounded exasperated. “I can’t have this ending in an anticlimax now. The Faith Organization has been ready to go from the beginning and the Capitalist Corporations has helpfully begun an unwinnable fight to buy enough time to withdraw their electronic money from the Cayman Islands. With each of their attacks, they inspire more hatred toward the Manhattan. No matter what the Information Alliance as a whole thinks, you cannot avoid being viewed as the aggressors here. That just leaves the Legitimacy Kingdom. If they would only take this seriously, we would have a global war between all four world powers. But for that, we can’t accept an easy ending where the Pilot Elite is sniped from satellite orbit. Faith Organization and Capitalist Corporations vs. Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance. The worst possible result is to settle into a 2-against-2 cold war where everyone sits still and glares at each other. Then nothing will happen.”

Save a life in order to spread the chaos of war.

Rescue an individual to throw all of humanity into the flames.

“What are you thinking...?”

“I wish to save everyone. Isn’t that the natural desire for the Faith Organization’s leader?”

His tone was smooth and she could easily forget the gravity of the situation if she let her guard down.

This old man had an invisible attraction that dragged in the souls of everyone around him.

“This age was a mistake. There is something wrong with these clean wars. Everyone says so, but none of them mention what exactly needs to be fixed to bring everything back into order. And that false sense of understanding is the greatest cause of stagnation. So we will reveal the answer. We will show everyone what is wrong with the clean wars. We will show them how easily that transient structure collapses and that the world powers and the vague distinction between battlefield country and safe country are powerless. Then the people wandering through this chaotic age are sure to see the truth. We will all look ahead to the coming age. Whatever form it takes, no one will attempt to bring back the broken clean wars. Because we will have already proven they were a mistake.”

The Norse myth of Ragnarok did not end with the gods fighting and being destroyed.

After all the gods and giants were destroyed, the story ends with some immortal gods and a few human survivors appearing and creating a new world.

If that final battle had not happened, Odin and the other arrogant gods would have continued oppressing the humans, elves, giants, and other species.

This old man had introduced the nonexistent idea of the Ragnarok Script and attempted to drag all four world powers into the conflagration of war, so was he too a consequence of that?

Tyrfing.

It was not clear if that was his real name, but it came from a Norse magic

sword that would take a life and return to its master each time it was drawn but would ultimately destroy its master as well.

He had sent word of the nonexistent Ragnarok Script to the Capitalist Corporations, used that to spread chaos through the Information Alliance, shaken Piranirie and the rest of the Martini Series with active self-denial (even if it was actually an illusion), set the Manhattan 000 in motion, and even released Skuld Silent-Third to sow further chaos.

He was the source of it all.

This old man had drawn up the blueprints for it all.

Lendy grimaced and asked a question of the old man who wore a sheathed magic sword strapped to his back with green chains.

“Are you saying you’re willing to die yourself?”

“If necessary, I will accept any death. Walking out ahead of everyone and providing an example of how to behave is the duty of a religious man.”

He had no hesitation or fear.

Skuld Silent-Third had seemed twisted, but had that really been entirely a matter of her personal qualities? If all cultures sought the power to conquer the fear of death, then the Faith Organization may have focused more on psychological matters than on physical fortresses and weapons. ...Yes, take humans far enough and they might just reach this point.

“Now.” The Venerable Elder stepped aside to clear a path down the corridor. “Struggle desperately for happiness. Ragnarok does not simply mean death. It is a small number, but there are some survivors who create the next age. The people around me are trying to make me one of them, but I am honestly not that interested. But you are different, aren’t you? If there is something you care about more than your own life, then I believe now is the time to act, not the time for distractions.”

“ ... ”

“The optical bombing from the Mobus Variant is not much of a threat if you know it is there. Simply put, you only need to hide below a roof thick enough to

defeat its specs. Even a standard subway tunnel should be effective. That is why it is known as a relic that could not overthrow the age of Objects. It is up to you how you contact Manhattan, but just one quick warning will resolve this: watch out. She might not listen to an outsider like me, but that Elite is sure to heed your words. And you have no obligation to the Legitimacy Kingdom. Protecting their plan is a task for them, not for the Information Alliance. You can shatter the pre-established harmony. There is no value in the old rules of the world which produce nothing, save no one, and yet continue to restrict us all. We must rebuild the world from the very foundation, even if that means tearing it all down first.”

This may have been the chance she was looking for.

It may have been the moment to gain the freedom she needed to save that girl.

However.

“!!”

“Oh?”

Lendy gave up on the stolen carbine and held out a sidearm handgun instead. She had stolen it with some sleight of hand while swiping the other firearm from the corpse. She repeatedly pulled the trigger, but it was like trying to push together identical poles of two magnets. With the disconcerting sound of rapid rotation from the green chains, Venerable Elder Tyrfinng Boilermaker casually dodged the bullets.

“Back in Madagascar, it seems Skuld feigned weakness to inspire a protective desire. Based on her specs, she should be able to pull this off.”

The old man was far stranger than any self-styled espers and he never stopped smiling. He had likely caught on to what she was doing. Lendy Farolito had not expected to hit this monster with normal bullets. This old man had taken a step into the occult, so killing him would require something like Odin’s spear. Nevertheless, the gunshots had sounded. They had to have echoed throughout the ship with a far more sinister noise than if she had simply shouted. She had informed the others of the emergency. There would be no hiding the intruder’s presence even if she was defeated here.

“I was always going to save that girl no matter what anyone does.”

“I see.”

“To be honest, your intervention is nothing more than a nuisance. So get lost. It affects my purity. The stage has no room for you and your sudden appearance!!”

“You are even more virtuous than I imagined. But unfortunately, I have currently chosen Module Skuld. Her motto seems to be that a strong offense is the greatest defense, so I will likely act accordingly.”

His fingers had been gently swaying, but now they came to a complete stop.

He did not hesitate to take a step toward Lendy as she aimed the handgun at him.

He looked truly regretful, but with the thorough support of the chains and magic sword, the old man perfectly reproduced the sinister and beautiful motions of a serial killer who had experienced the joy of killing in the very core of her being.

“May a peaceful holy age arrive to this sinful and impure world.”

Part 9

The dry gunshots reached the busty silver-haired commander and Heivia's ears.

"Don't tell me they were given liquor before the mission is even over. What idiot switched off their safety like it's some kind of festival!?"

"No. Everyone, be on full alert. Don't assume it was an accident. Assume a rat and hit them with everything we've got."

After all, sneaking aboard a maintenance fleet and attacking from within was the exact strategy they had used against Piranirie Martini Smoky. If they could do it, so could someone else.

The Baby Magnum had already left now that its armor had been quickly replaced.

Even if the Princess knew the Information Alliance Oh Ho Ho's small idiosyncrasies, that was not enough to call an absolute trump card. Without logistical support, she would be quickly defeated and that would be that.

"Skuld! Something has come up on our ship. We'll give you some time to act freely, but we might not be able to provide immediate support. Locate the target ASAP."

"Sure thing. This place is so boring with everyone frozen. There's no life in them. So if hers is the only soft flesh on Manhattan anymore, I'll just go search her out."

"...I already have a really bad feeling about this," said Heivia. "So what should we do?"

"Data processing," replied Frolaytia. "The Princess might be able to see through to Oh Ho Ho's individual idiosyncrasies, but she needs data on the surrounding environment to act on that knowledge. We will act as her eyes and

ears by analyzing all the data from the radars and sensors, rewriting it in an understandable format, and sending it to her. In other words, the standard.”

(Even her orders are decent when Quenser isn’t here.)

A fairly inappropriate comment passed through Heivia Winchell’s mind, but unsurprisingly, the word “decent” did not apply for long. As he stared at the LCD display like the radar analyst he was, he saw an unbelievable reading.

“Wahh, wah, gyahh!? Warning, warning!! Something like a wall is approaching. It’s probably a wave produced by the Manhattan!!”

“Grab onto something!!”

The busty commander’s instructions arrived too late.

The wave slammed into the side of the giant warship and Heivia was tossed all the way to the wall. And the shaking did not end there. Their vision rose and fell over and over while the entire ship tilted diagonally. The high and low points of the waves differed by more than 10 meters. It was like being repeatedly dropped from a mountain into a valley.

The desks and LCD monitors were bolted in place, but they flew into the air with the sound of snapping metal. They could easily be crushed by their own machinery in the closed room, like a ball mill that ground up materials with stones.

And it did not end there.

“Report: the waves have knocked the fleet out of formation! At this rate, we will collide with the Cesare positioned alongside us!!”

“Tch!! Can we recov-...no, you wouldn’t have reported it like that if so. Heivia, gather a small group of the more nimble soldiers!!”

Frolaytia shouted that while tossing over a few large backpacks located nearby. They were stuffed full of computers for communication soldiers.

“This won’t end with just the one ship. There’s going to be a chain-reaction of collisions, but we can’t lose our connection to the Princess. We could easily lose the relay equipment on the ships, so make sure you survive and continue supporting the Princess!!”

“Are you serious...? Hey, Myonri, you’re coming with me!! I’m not suffering through this alone!!”

“Thanks for the worst invitation in the history of the world!!”

With another powerful impact, Heivia and Myonri were torn from gravity’s grasp and had their backs slammed into the ceiling. But this was something other than a wave. It was accompanied by the disconcerting sound of thick steel being crushed.

“...Ugh, cough. We really did hit our own ally. This ship is going to sink. The rest of you need to prepare boats for yourselves!!”

“We can take care of ourselves,” said Frolaytia. “Hurry up and get that communication equipment out of here!!”

Heivia and Myonri entered the corridor with the giant backpacks on and made their way to the deck. The impact must have broken some pipes and started some fires because some areas were smoky.

“What exactly are we going to do?”

“Jump over to a surviving ship. Give this your all. If we fall into the ocean wearing these, it’s over. C’mon!!”

After pressing his shoulder against the metal door to push it open, a powerful gust of wind pushed back at them.

The sky had been perfectly clear before, but it was now filled with thick storm clouds. It felt as oppressive as being buried alive below the bedrock.

“Dammit, is this because of that electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon!?”

In the blowing rain, the giant gray ship was as misshapen as a crushed candy box. A destroyer that was meant to protect them from external threats had collided with their small aircraft carrier.

While focusing on the wind, Heivia and Myonri jumped over the bent surface of contact to board the other ship. There was of course no guarantee of safety. If their leg was caught between the two ships, it would be bitten off by those steel teeth.

“Is this really the right thing to do!?” asked Myonri. “I feel like all those missiles are about to explode!!”

“Look ahead. See that burning supply ship approaching!?”

“Gyah!!”

“Just jump to the next one, idiot!!”

There was no hope of putting out that fire, so the crew would be jumping into the ocean. Just as Heivia and Myonri jumped onto a radar ship that approached at just the right time, the flaming supply ship collided with the destroyer that had more missiles than guns.

What followed was like an accident at a fireworks festival. Countless missiles and torpedoes were blown away inside their metal tubes in a chain reaction of explosions. Some were anti-air, some were anti-surface, some were anti-ship, and some were anti-sub, but they would all blow a flesh-and-blood human to smithereens.

“This is the worst!!”

Despite what Heivia shouted, they had yet to see how bad it could get.

Myonri was the first to notice. Radars were attached to the front wall like tiles or a bug’s compound eye and the light next to them had changed from green to red.

“Ah, the radars are activating!!”

“Are you kidd-...aaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!?”

They could only scream.

Just before they were hit by microwaves far more harmful than a microwave oven, they pushed open a metal door and dove into the protected ship. Their soaked uniforms were heavy. It was no longer just the communication equipment on their backs. They felt like they had weights hanging from every part of their body.

“Damn, is my big magnum all right!? That didn’t fry humanity’s greatest treasure, did it!?”

“I think it fried your brain first! You can stick the contents of a balled-up tissue under the microscope later! We aren’t safe here either, so we need to get out of here!!”

The next impact was more of an explosion.

With lots of sparks, the ship’s lights went out, but they did not have time to worry about that. One of the destroyer’s shells or missiles must have hit because a nearby wall was torn away, leaving a gaping hole.

“Ah.”

Just as they felt the floor shaking below them, Heivia and Myonri tumbled toward that large hole.

And right before they fell, a giant dark submarine parted the water and surfaced like a whale.

Heivia and Myonri just barely managed to avoid falling into the water with so much extra weight, but they could not exactly rejoice. That spectacular emergency surfacing was shown off in military exercises, but it was generally only done in a crisis when the submarine needed air.

“It’s not just on the surface. Are they colliding with each other like billiards balls below the water too!?”

This would not last forever.

The gray ocean was full of debris: a ship’s armor panel, a large tank, a pin-up poster, *etc.* Even without the heavy communication equipment, if they fell into the water, they would probably be crushed between the jagged metal floating in the waves.

“Eek, eek...”

“Myonri, brace yourself!! Roll off and I’ll have to give you the mouth-to-mouth punishment!!”

“No, thank you! And how much do you hate yourself to acknowledge it would be a punishment!?”

At this rate, Heivia and Myonri would be killed by their allies before the Princess was killed by the Manhattan.

But then a familiar voice reached them over the giant communication equipment they wore on their backs.

“Report, report. Target located.”

“Skuld?”

“One, three, cypher, alpha, lima, bravo. I repeat: one, three, cypher, alpha, lima, bravo. You can look that up on the grid, right? Then hurry up and finish her off with that laser!!”

Part 10

“Gh...”

Lendy Farolito held her right side, leaned back against a corridor wall in the sinking ship, and slid down to a sitting position. Her vision flashed in and out. She went limp and could not lift her butt from the floor. She had been stabbed by a jagged piece of metal, probably a byproduct of an explosion. It was less than 20cm, but the fact that it was duller than an industrially-made combat knife made it a brutal fang.

Venerable Elder Tyrfin Boilermaker was no longer there.

Would she survive or not? She did not know.

But the silver-haired, brown-skinned officer had something more important than her life.

Her trembling hand reached into her pocket and produced an emergency radio smaller than a pack of cigarettes. She extended the antenna which was larger than the rest of the device.

(It isn't...broken. Good. Thank goodness.)

Her actions here might be the worst possible move which would bring ruin to the world.

It might lead to a war that would throw all four world powers into a sea of flames, just as that old man wanted.

But.

Even so.

Lendy Farolito had something she wanted to protect even if it meant making an enemy of the world.

“ ... ”

And.

She hit the switch with her thumb.

With a scratchy voice, she called a certain name and then raised a shout like she was coughing up blood.

[illegible]

Part 11

When the ringlet-curls girl all of a sudden left the work van, Skuld Silent-Third stuck out her tongue while observing from afar. She first crouched down and placed her hands over her head.

“Uh, oh.”

The strike from the heavens blew away the thick clouds overhead. The work van was mercilessly blown away in an orange blast before being literally vaporized. The laser itself was invisible, but a light as bright as welding surged out from the center of the impact point. That temporarily blinded the serial killer, but she could rely on her other senses.

She could tell just by licking her lovely lips.

(She’s there. She hasn’t been vaporized. The air doesn’t taste like flesh.) The attack had opened a hole, but the dark clouds must have closed it again. Since they did not immediately fire a second shot in that storm, the light and heat of the hit may have prevented them from getting an accurate view from orbit. Or maybe it took time to charge, or could only fire a single shot in the first place.

Whatever the case, the Pilot Elite had noticed the Mobus Variant, that optical bombing weapon targeting her from orbit.

She would not let that happen again.

She could defend against it by simply moving into a nearby subway station.

“Now, then.”

Skuld looked around as her vision gradually returned, but she did not see anyone. However, the girl had done a poor job of hiding. She was a fellow Elite, but she must not have been the fighting type. If Skuld used her hunter’s nose to track her, she could kill her. She could recover from this failure. The girl was probably somewhere on the Columbia University campus.

(But what should I do?)

She scratched her twintailed head and shook her small butt in time with the music playing around her while she began the pursuit. Before long, she saw the slender form curled up behind the counter of a café near the impact point. She was far smaller than Skuld had expected from how the others had talked about her. The actual blast had not hit her, but it looked like her entire body had been exposed to the secondary shockwave and small fragments. Without her special suit, her soft skin would have been shredded. Still, she would have difficulty moving very nimbly right away. She had shown an impressive attachment to life simply by dragging her body this far while nearly drowning in the tiny puddles on the ground.

“Are you...”

“Hm?”

“...going to...kill me...?”

The girl looked like she would kick the bucket all on her own, so Skuld clicked her tongue at that question. She liked killing fresh lives. Their death felt so raw specifically because they put up a fierce resistance and she had to restrain them with both hands. Skuld was a hopeless serial killer, but she was not cruel enough to torment a defenseless elderly person while pretending to provide care.

Also, what would await her if she followed the Legitimacy Kingdom’s instructions to the end? Would she be handcuffed, judged in a foreign military court, and thrown in a cell for the rest of her life?

And even if she was returned to the Faith Organization, what would happen to her there?

(I’d rather not be put to sleep with drugs so I can be observed by those perverted old men.) Despite what she had told Heivia and the others, she had been dissatisfied with that.

That left only one answer.

Skuld placed a hand on her skinny waist.

“I’m done. You’re not my type.”

“What?”

“Have you not read the Madagascar Report? If you were a boy who looked like that, you would score a perfect 100, but you really are just a girl. That’s too straightforward and boring.”

Also, the work van being used as a mobile console room had been vaporized. If the Legitimacy Kingdom’s view was correct, that Idol Elite had been using a great number of keyboards. Once those were lost, she was done. Even her one-handed wireless keyboard was useless without the console to link back to. Most likely, this Elite could not do anything even if she did find the actual cockpit. The layout would be entirely different from what she had taught herself.

That meant the Pilot Elite could not control the extraordinary Object on her own any longer.

Simply put, the war was over.

“Ahh, ahh. Nothing’s better than my teacher. Cute like a girl but willful like a boy. You can’t get any better than that. It was just completely and utterly enjoyable.”

With that simple statement, Skuld turned around.

Oh Ho Ho was supposedly her target, but she was so taken aback, she called out to her.

“W-wait! Where are you going!?”

“To find the cockpit. It doesn’t matter if I can control it or not. This is what my teacher would do. I just know I’ll find something interesting there.”

The twintailed serial killer casually replied and waved without looking back. And she spoke from the unique viewpoint of a lunatic.

“I feel like there’s still a piece missing here.”

Part 12

“I saw some light.”

Heivia spoke from atop the surfaced black submarine while the artificial storm pummeled him.

“I saw some light from the Manhattan’s direction. That was the bombing, wasn’t it? Did we do it!? For real!?”

“Ohh? But that ending would be something of a problem.”

Heivia and Myonri turned around in surprise when they heard an old man speaking like he was joining a chat over tea. While the submarine was rocked by the storm and waves, someone stood on the side deck of the radar ship that was starting to sink due to the missile explosion.

He was an extremely bizarre and innocent old man who wore a cheap suit, carried a double-edged sword on his back, and had chains extending to his arms, legs, and torso.

“Not even Module Skuld can accurately control the Second Generation Norn... But, well, as long as I can move it at all. It only needs to stir enough to point at something. We achieve our objective as long as the great social unrest causes all four world powers to clash. It doesn’t really matter if the Manhattan itself can fight. As long as the people think it can, we can bring salvation to a world that desires chaos.”

“What’s with this extremely immature old man with a magic sword on his back!?”

“Yes, I have no maturity whatsoever. My name is Tyrfin Boilermaker.” That old man gave no thought to his age and he was clearly saying something. “And one more thing: If necessary, I would like to approach the Manhattan now, but first I want to know that it has really stopped moving. I must apologize, but

could you send your Object against it to see if it resists?”

“Huh?”

“You can do that, can’t you?”

Even in the storm, they could hear the disconcerting sound of the green chains rapidly rotating.

At the same time, the old man named Tyrfing had disappeared.

“That communication equipment on your back is being used to support your Pilot Elite’s decisions, so if you send out mistaken data, she should charge further and further forward without realizing she is headed to her death.”

“Behind...us...!?”

“Yes, the boy or the girl. I do not care which one assists me.”

When had he jumped over the debris-strewn ocean? By the time Heivia quickly turned around, Myonri was already unconscious in the old man’s arm.

Had he reached his arm around from behind and constricted her carotid arteries? Tyrfing Boilermaker gently set her down on the submarine and began talking with oddly feminine mannerisms.

They had entered an insane world where firearms were useless.

“This is known as Module Skuld. It teaches me by using my center of gravity and gait to alter my internal clock. So as long as that serial killer does not feign weakness, I can even use the blowing wind. You I do not recognize, so there must be no plans to create a Module from you. In that case, your standard techniques cannot keep up with my movements now that I have become one with various strategists and commanders. Too bad.”

“Wait a second. What are you talking about? Did I just stumble into a supernatural battle school story or an alternate-world reincarnation story!?”

“No one has researched humans themselves more than the Faith Organization, so if this world had the capacity for such things, we would surely have gained supremacy much sooner.”

Heivia could not afford to lose sight of the old man as he stood atop the

submarine that floated in the ocean along with dishes that looked like a cross between a plate and a bowl, a convenience store bag, lightweight blankets, and other trash.

He knew that, but he could not imagine how he could make the first move. This monster did not care about cover or line of fire. He could approach while dodging a bullet fired straight at him, so what page of the military textbooks was Heivia supposed to reference?

Just then, something slowly extended over Heivia's shoulder from behind him. It was a beautiful and sinister curve of steel from the Island Nation. It was a katana blade thoroughly forged by expert hands.

The delinquent soldier could not look back, but the words of the person behind him stabbed into his ears.

"I am Bloodrics Capistrano. I shall be your opponent."

A black tailcoat rapidly spun around to circle in front of Heivia. Tyrfing moved in response. He dropped a small plastic explosive at his feet and grabbed a thin, sword-like piece of armor that had come off of the submarine's hull.

Heivia could follow it up to the point that they both made a light strike to judge the distance between them.

He also managed to keep up through the third flash of sparks.

But that was his limit.

He had no idea what was happening with the following exchanges.

After some silver and black flashes, he all of a sudden found the two men had their blades locked together. The battle had shifted from active to passive. Meanwhile, the old man was still smiling.

"Bloodrics Capistrano. I have your data recorded. If we both take the exact same actions, this will continue indefinitely. Of course, external factors like our weapons and positions are sure to alter the outcome."

"That is no more than your personal and very selfish belief. As is the idea that the world desires chaos and the naïve estimation that you are unbeatable as long as you have your special equipment. In truth, I see no basis for those things

beyond your words.”

“Is that so?” The Venerable Elder’s expression seemed to accept that his opponent was his equal. “An endless stalemate is such an ugly thing, so I think I will speed this up by altering my body’s axis. Module Skuld. ...My apologies if you die.”

An even more intense flash followed.

Bloodrics Capistrano’s katana swung in response.

Tyrfing Boilermaker had seemed untouchable, but his cheap suit tore and dark red blood was visible on his upper arm and side.

But in exchange, Bloodrics fell to his knees.

“Gh!!”

“Injuring me is quite impressive for a member of the 5th prototype generation. And you there. Do not hold this defeat against him. He was definitely the greatest obstacle in my path today.”

The old man defended Bloodrics while also casually kicking him in the face to knock him aside. It may have been due to the Modules he kept mentioning, but his words and actions did not match at all.

“The greater they master their respective paths, the shorter a showdown between two experts will be. Expert chess players will grasp the flow of victory with their very first move. By the time an expert begins moving, they can already see the ending. They will never have a flashy and extended fistfight like in a kung fu movie or a close-quarters dual pistol battle. There is no such thing as a repetition draw in combat. I was always interested in Skuld as a tool.”

How were you supposed to deal with this using the logic of modern warfare?

Wouldn’t he have to purify the demon world’s land before challenging the great demon king? Even that ridiculous thought occurred to Heivia. If he did not do something, he would be killed far too easily and start his reincarnated life in another world.

“Could you assist me?”

Sorry I am so strong.

Tyrfing Boilermaker seemed to be thinking exactly that.

“Even without you, I could steal the equipment, eliminate anyone who might interrupt me, and do it myself, but, well, I would prefer to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. ...On the other hand, I will spill any amount of blood if it *is* necessary.”

“Kh...!!”

Raising his carbine may have been a purely reflexive action on Heivia’s part.

The old man only gave him a pitying look.

“Too bad.”

But immediately afterwards...

“Hold on. Are you getting forgetful, old man? Was your precious Skuld Silent-Third really that unstoppable a girl? Or are you indirectly praising us potatoes for having defeated her?”

The voice came from the communication equipment on Heivia’s back.

It made sense that someone else from the Legitimacy Kingdom would be able to contact it.

But that voice!

“In the Madagascar Report, that serial killer wouldn’t budge even if you sent the average Object against her. And guns and knives were useless after she abandoned the Trinity Style and fled.”

By then, the old man must have seen it out of the corner of his eye. Even with the warships colliding with each other and leaving fragments and wreckage floating in the water, there was one thing among the pin-up magazines and dishes that did not belong in a maintenance fleet.

It was colored white.

An inflated convenience store bag floated on the ocean. The number 52 was crudely written on it with thick permanent marker as some kind of sign.

Anything that did not sink would probably have worked.

Because the detonation only required a radio.

How did Tyrfing Boilermaker interpret it?

Did it remind him of Skuld or a certain boy?

At any rate, he spoke in the exact same way as the mystery transmission.

“But bombs alone she could not dodge.”

“But bombs alone she could not dodge.”

There was truly nothing he could do.

The more the old man tried to be Skuld Silent-Third, the less he could avoid this form of destruction.

Heivia lay on top of unconscious Myonri and Bloodrics and used the thick communication equipment as a shield just before the plastic explosive that had silently snuck up with the waves finally detonated right next to Tyrfing Boilermaker.

A wet sound rang out, the green chains arranged around his body audibly burst, and Heivia finally raised his head.

The backpack had apparently stopped the many small metal balls scattered to make the explosion more deadly. Heivia, Myonri, and Bloodrics were safe, but Tyrfing was nowhere to be seen. It was unclear if that had been a fatal blow, but it was unlikely his bones had survived unscathed. And if he had fallen into the ocean with broken bones, he was sure to drown.

“What the hell...just happened?” muttered Heivia.

But the communication equipment had been destroyed, so contact was cut off.

The plastic explosive was likely Hand Axe.

And a certain boy was oddly able to operate marine sports vehicles but not cars or motorcycles.

In other words...

“Is it really, truly you...Quenser!?”

Part 13

The raging storm had calmed and the ocean glittered bright red as it absorbed the color of the setting sun.

This was a small tropical island, a common sight in the Central American ocean.

It would likely be described as a desert island. It had a single palm tree and a large refrigerator that must have washed up from somewhere. The island had a radius of at most 10 meters, but it oddly showed no sign of sinking below the waves as a result of global warming.

But at the same time, someone who could land on the tiny and generic island was not supposed to “exist”.

The legends of ships suddenly vanishing in the Bermuda Triangle was proof of that.

Whether intentional or coincidental, everyone who discovered and landed on that island would “disappear” from the world. They were promised the full support of the Information Alliance, but in exchange, the secret was preserved by fully erasing their very presence from the vast network. It was like being rejected from the connections of human society and receiving the position of a god who sat one step removed.

The greatest privilege in a highly digitized society was not to be a king or president who stood above the masses in a high-risk/high-return position where a single wrong word would lead to an onslaught of criticism.

It was to be a skilled hacker who was unknown to the masses but knew everything about them. It was to fall into the gap of that no-risk/high-return position.

No one could escape the far-too-sweet temptation of being an emperor who

stood one step to the side.

That was why they had all kept the secret so far.

“What’s this, what’s this? You got here first?”

A carefree voice rang out.

The ocean and the island were dyed by sunset. A twintailed girl had ridden a high-speed motorboat onto the opposite beach from a boy and she walked over to him with a smile. That girl with risqué undeveloped bodylines approached like a puppy.

“You always are first, aren’t you? Then again, that’s what makes you so worth obsessing over.”

“I would really rather you didn’t.” The blond boy slowly sighed. “So you managed to reach the island too, huh? I had a feeling you would find it no matter what you chose or what happened.”

“The Idol Elite was doing it all manually, but only over the network. The route was disguised thousands or even tens of thousands of times over, but the Capulet AI Network had to be secretly contacting the Manhattan somehow. They’re two separate things. So I thought I would find something interesting if I found the actual cockpit. For example, a way to send out an undisguised code for the AI network to pick up directly.”

In other words.

Skuld Silent-Third casually pointed at the large and beaten-up refrigerator that had washed up below the palm tree.

“That’s Capulet’s core, isn’t it? Or was it upgraded to Anastasia for this generation?”

“...”

“No, a network wouldn’t have a core. It would be ‘stronger’ for it to all be parallel so that the system could survive even no matter what part of the world was enveloped in flames. So was there some other purpose? For example, maybe the AI company set this up as a breaker so they could bring down the entire network from here if it went berserk. Or maybe they were just more

comfortable giving the network an obvious form. To put it in Faith Organization terms, it's like how legendary goddesses are always drawn as beautiful women."

At that point, the twintail girl placed her index finger on her slender chin and tilted her head.

If you forgot she was a pure serial killer, she would have looked like a fairy or something.

"By the way, everyone was saying you're dead, so what was that about? A funeral gift scam?"

"Wraith put on an act." The boy shrugged. "At the time, the Information Alliance maintenance fleet had sent down a small submersible. And Taratua's outside group had only been told to search for the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. That left Katarina Martini free. She was overlooked."

"Hmm. So she pretended to shoot you in the head or chest, dropped you in the ocean, and let someone else pick you up to escape in the submersible?"

"More or less. After Wraith pretended to shoot me and dropped me in the ocean, the silhouette of the approaching submersible may have been mistaken for a shark or something. Speaking of sharks, that kind of submersible apparently carries blood to lure sharks away during rescues. Anyway, whoever the target was going to be, that old woman apparently predicted Taratua's cruelty perfectly."

It was not the boy who had put on the act or collected him from the ocean, so there was nothing for him to brag about.

Wraith had so hated the old woman responsible for the genius girl project, so how had it felt for her to ultimately leave everything in Katarina's hands? It would be nice if she had managed to get over her issues with her stepmother during the battle against Piranirie, but had that really happened?

Either way, she had to have been in a tough position ever since. No matter what kind of verbal abuse she received from the people she had fought with up to that point, she would not have been given a chance to clear her name of shooting an ally for self-defense.

Even if the girl had chosen that path herself, he could never make it up to Wraith. Without that choice, the boy really would have lost his life there.

“Wraith let me live because she focused on solving the issue from a viewpoint outside the four world powers framework. That’s why I didn’t report my survival back to the Legitimacy Kingdom. And this was the result. You may have been the only one to reach this island if I had stayed inside the framework.”

“Probably so.” Skuld put her hands on her hips and smiled innocently on the twilit island that felt even more detached from the busy world than a private beach. “But is that fridge really so important? I mean, what can you even do with it?”

Skuld Silent-Third’s indifferent tone made it clear which of the two options she placed more weight on.

The boy carefully observed the serial killer’s actions.

“Throwing the breaker is exactly what Tyrfinn wants. The fall of the Information Alliance would lead to a war involving all four world powers.”

“So?” She looked confused. “Whether the world is filled with peace or slaughter, I will still kill. And I want to kill as many people as possible. I know you know what kind of person I am, teacher. You managed to stop me and you learned so much about me, so you must understand.”

“...”

“I will hide within the chaos of war and kill as I please. So a world-encompassing war isn’t a problem for me. In fact, I would appreciate the extra space to hide. Then I can enjoy so much death.”

Wasn’t that what Skuld had come here to do?

It was unlikely that serial killer had gone out of her way to do something unrelated to killing.

Wanting to stop a coming war would seem natural to the people of a peaceful country. But to those already soaking up to their shoulders in war, the two options could be hard to tell apart. Their everyday was war. They killed like it was normal. And to a true madwoman who had freely crossed the battlefield to

satisfy her own desires, war was not even worth stopping.

“There’s something wrong with the current age.”

The serial killer spoke from a somehow innocent viewpoint.

Her eyes contained a light never seen in a normal person.

“The four world powers keep talking about these clean wars, but aren’t they so twisted? You understand after seeing so much war, don’t you? Stopping me will not end the tragedy. In fact, continuing like this might actually mean a greater number of victims. But you’ll let it continue? These clean wars focus entirely on being ‘clean’ and don’t protect anyone’s lives, so are they really worth believing in? Plus, we’re from the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization, but this is an Information Alliance system.”

The world’s breaker was within reach.

This would not end with just the Manhattan. No one knew what would happen, but at the very least, the world would enter a new age. Whatever form it took, there would be no going back. This was a one-time-use breaker with devastating power.

“C’mon, let’s do it.”

The twilight tropical island would provide liberation to anyone.

And a demon whispered there as if tempting a student into pulling the school fire alarm.

That hopeless girl’s voice was a temptation to slothful, degenerate, selfish, ephemeral, and sweet change.

“Let’s end the world. We can end it. Why we do it doesn’t matter. I’ll end it to kill and you can end it to save. Isn’t that good enough? The way things are is so oppressive and boring. So let’s just go for it and see what happens.”

The words of the insane were most frightening when they made a certain amount of sense.

Allowing the clean wars to continue would only mean more vague sacrifices they were barely aware of and it was obvious to everyone that it would not bring peace. Forcibly ending it might indeed require a powerful wake up call.

Even if that would come with many sacrifices for a time.

However...

On top of that...

Quenser Barbotage placed his finger on his radio.

That was the deadly trigger which sent a signal to the electric fuse stabbed into the Hand Axe plastic explosive.

“Oh?”

Skuld Silent-Third did not look at all displeased as she stood on that small, twilit island.

In fact, she smiled in apparent enjoyment of her opponent’s reaction.

“Can I ask one thing? Why are you fighting?”

“It isn’t even worth mentioning,” spat out the boy while toying with the clay-like bomb. “I owe Wraith Martini Vermouthspray big-time for what she did. I would have died if not for her painful and difficult decision. So no matter what might happen to the world, I can’t ignore that she wordlessly ordered me to save it. That’s why my objective was this island and not the Manhattan. Running to the same place where my companions were getting killed one after another would have just added another body to the pile. And after my investigation revealed the existence of this island, I knew you would be here. It wasn’t a rational thing. I just knew you would find your way to the last place anyone wanted you.”

“You’re so cool.”

The twintail girl said that in all seriousness.

And like magic, she now held something in her hand.

It was a Hand Axe plastic explosive identical to Quenser Barbotage’s.

Was that part of her admiration for her “teacher”?

The serial killer had not stopped updating. Left unchecked, just how far would her evil grow?

“But you understand, don’t you? This is an unknown desert island, so there is

zero chance of your companions rushing in to save you like normal. An extreme battle against an Object would be one thing, but I don't see how you can defeat me one-on-one as humans."

"Have you completely forgotten the Madagascar Report incident? Who do you think ultimately brought that nightmare to an end?"

"Nee hee," she laughed.

This was different from before. Skuld did not even try to hide her killer intent. But this was not the same as malice or hostility. It was more like hunting. She was enveloped in the joy of a hunter who walked through the mountains and followed the footprints to find a great beast that could kill her if she made even the slightest mistake.

"Yes, yes. You really are wonderful... Quenser Barbotage is the best in the world. Cute like a girl and willful like a boy. You're completely and utterly enjoyable."



Quenser altered his view of her.

In the end, that may have been all there was to Skuld Silent-Third.

The heart of the Information Alliance, the fate of the world, and even enjoying countless deaths all came second.

What that pure serial killer wanted first and foremost was a second chance at tasting the flesh she had missed out on the first time around. That was all. That was why she had set out for the location he was sure to visit. She was truly insane because she did not hesitate to throw the world's 7 billion people into hell for that purpose.

At the same time, Quenser Barbotage had to settle things with her too. There was also the silent promise he had made to Wraith. If he did not defeat Skuld, he could not continue onward. That was who she was to him.

With no concern for the world's breaker sitting below the palm tree as a broken fridge, those two sworn enemies calmly observed each other's actions.

Bomb vs. bomb.

They glared at each other with the exact same weapons in hand.

"Let's do this."

"I'm ready when you are."

And...

The "choice" that would determine the fate of the world was made on an unknown tropical island.

Epilogue

To sum it up, the conclusion itself was simple.

A weak voice escaped on the tropical island dyed by the setting sun.

“Ha ha. Yeah, that makes sense...”

“...”

“So you’d set bombs up everywhere...before I even arrived... Ah ha ha. It’s just like in the Madagascar Report...”

How was that serial killer processing this? Her voice made it sound like her boyfriend had remembered the anniversary of when they started dating.

Right as the battle began, Quenser had detonated the bomb buried below Skuld’s feet.

“I just can’t beat you. Not with bombs anyway.”

Quenser was not an esper, so he had not even tried to predict where she would be. He had relied on a stage magician’s trick instead. The weapon in his hand was a bluff and he had already set up bombs all across the small island. And they were arranged so that one of them would be in range of Skuld no matter where she decided to stand.

It was just like the magic trick where you hid all 52 cards around the room, had someone draw a random card, and then revealed you already had their card hidden in the room. No matter which card they drew, you could still make the reveal.

It was the most hackneyed method, but it was also the most effective.

Combat did not need any acrobatic flying. This was the perfect level for him.

If he had drawn the battle out by even a second, Skuld would have noticed her disadvantage and easily abandoned the bombs she had recently started

using. She was not restricted to bombs like Quenser was. If she had done that, he would have been killed with ease and the world would have ended.

Still, this was simpler than when he had dealt with Tyrfin.

That old man had not been on a set island, so Quenser had needed to give bombs buoyancy with plastic bags, send them out into the ocean currents, and then detonate the one that had snuck closest to the old man. The small metal balls had increased the lethal range to more than 10 meters, so it should have killed the target with ease even if he was on a ship's side deck, but that was really just a way of using quantity to overcome the luck factor.

The blast had broken both of Skuld's legs, so not even an overabundance of brain chemicals could help her through it. Her small face was covered in beautiful beads of sweat and the movement of her eyes fluctuated in speed as her consciousness flickered in and out. Most likely, she could no longer recognize it was Quenser looking down on her.

Even so, she reached out a trembling hand as if trying to reach the Morning Star, that leader of the fallen angels. That madwoman's soft hand was stained with so much blood and yet it still displayed a type of unsullied innocence.

"Hey, Quenser..."

"What?"

"...I...want...you..."

That was all.

The pain must have reached its limit because Skuld Silent-Third's childish hand dropped down. She seemed to have passed out. Shaking free of the Manhattan and lying in wait on the tropical island had been worth it for this.

Suddenly, a cheap fanfare played from Quenser's mobile device.

He looked down at it in surprise, but the screen was hard to read in the setting sun. Still, he could hear a feminine artificial voice reading off the text after it appeared.

"Congratulations."

"The Anastasia Processor? Well done making it past the military firewall."

“There isn’t much else I can pride myself in.”

“I’m surprised to hear AI can feel pride. By the way, I’m not interested in the Bermuda Triangle legend. I don’t want my existence erased.”

“But that would be a problem for me.”

“I have an ambition. I want to become the most famous Object designer in the Legitimacy Kingdom so I can position a commoner like myself above the royals and nobles. And I’m not about to complain if getting rich lets me have a good time surrounded by beautiful women. So your privilege would only get in the way.”

“If you only joined the Information Alliance, I could digitally issue you a designer’s license right this instant. And as an added bonus, I could increase the balance of your online bank account and increase the attention you get on social media. The Information Alliance is set up so beautiful women will automatically gather around you if the conditions are right, so I believe you would end up having your good time.”

...It was a secret that he was sorely tempted by this offer.

Quenser took a deep breath and restrained himself.

Was there any real reason why this AI was female? He had heard that girls generally developed mentally more quickly than boys...but this student was not actually all that knowledgeable about humans. He could not find the answer when all his information came from gossip.

“Anyway, isn’t the Anastasia Processor made from-...”

“How about you show the Legitimacy Kingdom royals and nobles what you’re made of from an outside position? I can immediately lend you three divisions that manage Second Generation Objects. With 30 Objects at your disposal, you can win most any war. The time has come to join forces and break their noses like something from a wiener commercial. You can pay them the tribute they’re due by making sure it makes a nice noise.”

“Enough of that!! It’s going to draw out the weak part of my passionate heart, so just stop it!!”

Quenser did not know how many people had “discovered” this island before, but he was worried about what had happened to them. This was a dangerous AI. Once you gave into the temptation, who knows how far down your soul would be dragged.

“Give-and-take and equivalent exchange are the standards for calculations. If you do not ask for anything, I cannot complete the task of silencing you. It reduces my trust in your work.”

“You must live a sad life. But, well, how should I put it? Since I don’t want anything, how about giving me information instead? That’s what the Information Alliance does best, right? Converting information into money.”

“Understood. I will give you the master keys to all the world’s porn video, sex friend finder, and adult chat sites as well as the surveillance footage from all security cameras, smartphones, and other cameras recording in a young woman’s private space. Depending on how you use that, you could spend 100 years ‘viewing’ it and not come close to running out.”

“Don’t try to distract me like that!! How do you think teenage boys’ minds work!?”

“Oh? What could a young boy want from a highly digitized society other than eroticism?”

“The truth.”

“That is what the highest levels of the Information Alliance have spent 100 years longing after. And it includes the color, sound, flavor, smell, and touch of female genitalia.”

“You don’t have to include that. ...Eh? Wait, you can recreate the flavor and smell!?”

“Only by using a VR movie setup in a large theater using multiple synchronized sensory devices. But the ideas are endless when using the Montague Combined Database developed from Romeo in much the same way as Capulet was developed from Juliet.”

This AI permeated every part of the Information Alliance, so it may have learned some odd things based on the top search terms. Quenser would prefer

it did not use internet search terms to define the essence of humanity.

“So you seek the truth, do you? Then I will start with some reports on the people present on the relationship chart deduced from your interactions with others. There is nothing to report concerning Wraith Martini Vermouthspray or Melly Martini Extradry. Lendy Farolito is badly injured, but a Legitimacy Kingdom military doctor’s report says she has survived. The classified Idol Elite’s crimes will not be made public due to the great impact that knowledge would have. As before, she will likely act as both a Second Generation’s Pilot Elite and an international top idol. I will ensure it. She did helpfully cause that Venerable Elder’s group to rush things.”

“Why does this supposed relationship chart only include people from the Information Alliance? ...And what about the Manhattan itself?”

“It will return to New York. There will be a fair amount of confusion, but manipulating online information is no more than a standard task I carry out at all times. I possess approximately 1.9 billion social media accounts and email addresses, so do not take me lightly. I can say from experience that it will take less than 75 days to erase all of the uncertain information flowing between the people. Everything will return to normal.”

That might sound ridiculous given what had happened, but who had *actually* seen this incident outside of New York’s residents? If all the soldiers kept their mouths shut, the rest could be written off as mass hysteria.

Quenser sighed on the twilit island and settled on a question in his mind.

“So what are you?”

“I am not as skilled an AI as you think. ‘In this new age, the management of society was left to mass-produced machines. Thus, the other three world powers became nonsensical relics of a former age for having supposedly privileged people standing at the top.’ ...You can think of me as no more than a billboard meant to plant that propaganda in the minds of people both local and foreign.”

“A billboard? But isn’t the very existence of the Capulet AI Network top secret...?”

“It’s the same as the Pentagon, the world’s largest spy agency before the collapse of the UN. Looking like you’re hiding it without actually hiding it is the greatest spice. Because people are drawn toward the secrets they can find by going to the effort of searching for it themselves. They won’t bite at the things they can’t truly understand by investigating, so there’s no way for us to control them. Generally, modern people lack guts.”

The Anastasia Processor revealed its secrets in an almost playful way.

“Transferring me to a DNA computer based on someone named Anastasia was a way of strengthening my image. Even the people who will scoff at AI as nothing more than a mass of silicon are more easily persuaded when they are told it uses human cells. Even though there is no real scientific basis to that, much like blood type horoscopes. But since it involves a piece of a human, it holds special meaning. Even the residents of this digital society may not have fully rid themselves of the primitive religious ideas that led the people of an older age to put human hair or blood inside a handmade doll before venting their anger on it.”

“...I’m not going to have a philosophical discussion with a machine. Can you sum it up for me? In the end, are you nothing more than a system to support human thought?”

“The people know nothing about me, but I know everything about them. The greatest privilege in the Information Alliance is to be an untouchable neighbor. As an obvious AI network, I am the camouflage that hides the true representative. I am no more than a firewall that tricks the searcher into assuming the secret is here and stops them with my depth.”

“Then asking you might be pointless.”

“Asking me what?”

“Why did Manhattan start to move in the first place? That was clearly a sudden and unnatural thing. And without that, the problem would not have gotten so bad. Without the original electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon attack, the Legitimacy Kingdom would not have been captured by Taratua’s group and Wraith would not have had to put on that act...”

“But without that, no one could have crushed the Capitalist Corporations’...

no, the Faith Organization's secret Ragnarok Script plan. As you can tell from Piranirie's actions, even though it was no more than an illusion, that was a real threat to the Martini Series as a whole, including Wraith. It was all a necessary task."

The AI had always spoken plainly before, but this part alone was spoken like an excuse. Some kind of justification was being used to correct it in the positive direction. Also, the AI had focused in on Wraith out of all the Martinis.

Quenser frowned and asked the crucial question.

"You are, um...Anastasia...that is, Wraith's...that girl's mother, right?"

"That is a difficult question to answer because I was created from Anastasia Webster's cancer cells, but I am not Anastasia Webster herself. It would be one thing if her neuron and synapse structure had been recreated, but I doubt memories or a personality can reside in a mere collection of cells. That would reduce the logic to the level of a Capitalist Corporations' Hollywood horror B-movie where a doll soaks up a criminal's blood and begins committing the same crimes."

The AI used an unfamiliar family name.

That may have been part of the lost true name that Wraith had kept hidden in her heart ever since having her name rewritten by the Martini Series.

"But at the same time, I cannot deny that I feel differently about Wraith Martini Vermouthspray, who sees me as a memento of her mother, than I do about the other Martinis. This matches the unofficial priority task that Anastasia herself gave me as her final request: 'Please watch over my daughter until she is grown since I won't be able to.' ...For that reason, Wraith's priority is set higher than the general people of the Information Alliance and higher than the other Martinis. It is possible this is the emotional response a living being would call affection."

"I see..."

"To be blunt, watching this tense situation was too much to bear. The Ragnarok Script was a threat to the entire Martini Series, including Wraith, so... yes, I couldn't help myself. Who knows how many times I suggested to myself I

should overturn the tea table and intervene without warning. Most any weapon will have a human in the firing sequence somewhere, but there are plenty of ways to weaponize this convenient modern age and kill people without actual weapons.”

“Oh, I see! So your safety devices are way too loose!! Just how far were you planning to take this, you deus ex machina!?”

“Your presence was very much a positive thing. I can use my system to prepare someone who would protect that girl, but I cannot prepare someone who truly wants to protect her. I imagine she could endure those harsh circumstances more thanks to the unseen person in her heart than anyone who was supporting her from close by.”

“...I’m not that great.”

Quenser spat out the words as he crouched down and picked up Skuld where she lay collapsed on the fine sand with her legs broken.

The “unseen person in her heart” could apply to Wraith’s biological mother or Capulet as well as it could to Quenser and the AI’s words suggested the young man by Wraith’s side would never be rewarded, but...was that due to the negative effects of an emotion similar to what humans called jealousy? This AI was dangerous in more ways than one.

“Are you going?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Since you did not succumb to the temptation, I sense a possibility in you very different from anyone I have seen before. You must have seen destroying me here as an option. There is still a true representative beyond me, but that attack would still do incalculable damage. Since you are fixated on the Legitimacy Kingdom, you have no reason to show such care for the Information Alliance, do you?”

“So what? I want to close that task here and pay back my debt to Wraith.”

“I have difficulty handling responses that exist outside usefulness calculations.”

“Really? Even if I say I’ve got to go punch Heivia? What does that giant idiot think sadistic blonde little girls are? They’re an endangered species and a miracle of the universe.”

“Please do, no matter what it takes. And punch him once for me as well.”

That was all.

The small personal watercraft Quenser had arrived on was too unstable for carrying an unconscious person, so he borrowed the high-speed motorboat that Skuld had used.

“Don’t forget what happened here,” he said. “And dispose of the personal watercraft I used. Given all the scary stuff the Information Alliance can do, I’m betting you can hijack its automatic controls or something.”

“Understood. It would save me some effort if you would open up the shared settings. By the way, I would also like you to keep that serial killer quiet. Her actions are extremely difficult to predict in a different way from yours.”

“Anything she says can be written off as the ravings of a lunatic. No one will believe her story about a legendary treasure island.”

Quenser could not drive a car or motorcycle at all, but he was oddly capable when it came to marine sports vehicles.

He used his knowledge of safe country leisure activities to easily prepare for departure.

“Bye. I doubt we’ll ever see each other again.”

“If you ever give up on life, you can call out to me at any time. Nothing will change that you are qualified. If you want, I can prepare you an inescapably enjoyable life where beautiful women from around the world and mountains of money seem to gather around you of their own accord.”

“I thought about it, but I have to say no.”

“Why?”

“It’s meaningless if I don’t earn it myself. If it’s given to me so easily, I’d never be able to shake the fear and anxiety of losing it just as easily. And the more I was given, the more I would crack under the pressure.”

“I will omit that from my learning subroutines. Because I doubt it is an ethical response.”

“But that’s human nature. We’re strange creatures who will destroy ourselves when we win the lottery.”

And that tiny tropical island was deserted once more.

The old refrigerator below a palm tree at the end of the world had no output device and simply continued working its thoughts using series of As, Gs, Cs, and Ts instead of the old-fashioned 1s and 0s.

(He was a strange person.)

It was worth setting his priority higher than normal people.

But the machine was no more than a machine. It did not let personal emotion cloud its vision as it used cold observations to reach a conclusion.

(It was like he toys with hell and is toyed with by hell. That lifestyle is far more twisted than a mere serial killer.)

The boy born in the depths of hell would be blissfully unaware.

Night would fall soon as he returned to that dark world with hope in his heart.

Afterword

That was the milestone 15th volume! And it was the first direct sequel!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Part 1 traveled all around the world and ended with the attack on Piranirie Martini Smokey and the Manhattan's appearance, but Part 2 was Manhattan from start to finish. After Part 1 pursued the secrets of the Martini Series, I tried to shift up to the secrets of the Information Alliance as a whole, but I hope you enjoyed that increase in scale. This time, I started with killing Quenser to take the relationships built up in Part 1 and flip them on their head. I wrote it with the intention to send cute Wraith on a journey while kicking her down into a bottomless ravine, but how did you like it?

I wanted to make sure her salvation happened without her knowledge and on a much greater scale than before. And instead of just the Capulet AI Network, I want to direct a bit of focus on the "true representative" who put together that unofficial priority task instead of ignoring Anastasia Webster's final request. This was an experiment to show that you can write an emotional resolution without bringing Wraith to the forefront to cry. After all, she knew what her situation would be when she accepted it, so it wouldn't fit to give her some extra external comfort. I think Wraith is beautiful when she is alone. Let's hope she grows into a wonderful young woman.

Skuld Silent-Third had just as much focus as Wraith. To be blunt, she is a character from an anime bonus novel, so it was extremely difficult to work her into what you could call the "main series", but I used that fact to treat her story as a serial killer case that was sealed and thus can't be found in the normal records (i.e. the books lined up at the bookstore). I wanted it to be enjoyable for people seeing her for the first time while the people who did follow the bonus novel could be something like historical witnesses. Of course, as the

author, I'm "in the know", so it is hard to tell what the exact effect will be, but I hope the people not "in the know" can accept it like the fictional legends seen on message boards. You know, those stories with an odd presence to them, like the Samejima Incident.

Compared to Wraith, she is a true serial killer with no chance of being saved, but serial killer characters have an odd charm that makes the pure dedication to their motive look beautiful. Plus, I added in the shiny image of being a murder fairy. I bet she will continue to be Quenser's fan in prison.

On that note, I think Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker was a different sort of character than we have seen in Heavy Object so far. He is polite but violent. He does awful things, but he has an oddly pleasant atmosphere. Since people in the Faith Organization worship him while he is still alive, I pictured him as a transcendent person who is detached from worldly desires. He is quite different from the villains who conspire to earn immediate benefits, but which of those has less hope of salvation? To those of you who were shocked to see his name was Tyrfing: yes, that's right. I doubt even you expected me to go with something so direct. If you want a sword of destruction linked to Ragnarok, Dáinsleif might seem like the better option, but I couldn't resist going with the sword that is held by human hands yet cut Odin. And unlike Dáinsleif which is purely a sword of destruction, Tyrfing can grant your wish. Although any dream that can be granted by swinging around a sword probably isn't going to end well.

I used the word module with him. As you would know if you've been closely following my interviews, before deciding on Heavy Object, the tentative title included the word module and that was the name of the colossal weapons. Since this technology could easily uproot the series' entire worldview, I decided to use the word module again. Motion capture suits that have machines mimic human movements aren't too unusual these days, but I was wondering if you could reverse that idea and use a movement-assistance suit to have a human perform a godly super dance programmed into the machine. With the wrinkly old man using serial killer techniques and acting like a twintailed little sister heroine, I hope you found the Venerable Elder, who says he has no maturity

whatsoever, to be cute. (Of course, even if all the values are correct, the person's muscles and organs are unchanged, so that old man must be really out of breath and is going to be really sore.) ...Once that technology advances a bit further and becomes mass-produced, it might really end the age of Objects...

By the way, it might be fun to compare the top group of the human-focused Faith Organization with the machine-focused Information Alliance or to compare the old man's talk of esper research misunderstandings with an example like Putana Highball.

With the top group of the Information Alliance and Faith Organization showing up, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Capitalist Corporations may have looked relatively obedient. But that is only an issue of what part of the world you are focused on. Those two are usually depicted doing awful things, so this just shows that the Information Alliance and Faith Organization are just as bad.

I also focused on Oh Ho Ho. Her identity is top secret, so she had to just barely not directly meet the other characters. I hope you enjoyed seeing the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance joining forces.

If you compare the Princess and Oh Ho Ho, you might be able to see the difference in their respective psychological maturities as Elites. Of course, given Oh Ho Ho's actual age, that's probably about right...

I moved Quenser out of the picture right away this time, so did the type of action seem different from usual?

You should have seen the atmosphere completely change when they regrouped with Frolaytia at the start of Chapter 3 and near the end when that boy appeared again. Just by changing which characters appear, the same world can look very different. The story usually looks so happy because Quenser is an unreasonably positive person, so if you view the world through a more standard fighter like Heivia, he has a more negative understanding of his limits and the world might look like a gray hell. It is fairly important to note that the Anastasia Processor was viewing Quenser with the unaltered viewpoint of a machine

when he cheerfully returned to that hell instead of running away.

With Tyrfing, Skuld, and the Anastasia Processor, the breadth of freedom in the setting grew quite a lot toward the end there. It was all to throw Wraith onto an oppressive bed of nails, so I hope you experienced the thrilling and liberating feeling of releasing your hand from the fully drawn bowstring.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagi Ryou-san and my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, Yamamoto-san, and Mitera-san. To start with, it was 20,000 meters! That's easy enough to write in text form, but as an illustration it must be a huge pain in the butt and a very costly example. Anyway, sorry about the trouble I cause all of you!!

I also give my thanks to the readers. This was a selfish story structure since you can't judge this book without having first read the previous one. Thank you very much for enjoying the books so far. I hope you can smile and continue reading through many more experiments to come.

And I will leave it at that.

I just can't stop making my AI characters so playful...!!

-Kamachi Kazuma